

The Generations]

Dancing Through Time

Dancer Jody Sperling Reflects on the Past

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In time-lapse photography, time is collapsed so that, for example, a house that might take three months to build goes up in three minutes on screen and a year of seasons passes before the eyes in 30 seconds. It is this same effect that dancer and choreographer Jody Sperling says she is trying to achieve with her dance, not by collapsing a process that would take hours into a few minutes, but by overlaying modern dance techniques with choreographic elements that recall how the body moved in past eras.

Sperling, who named her dance company "Time Lapse Dance" and who is also a scholar of dance, has spent the past six years studying and drawing on the dances of Loie Fuller, a late nineteenth-century choreographer and dancer who transformed skirt dancing—a dance form traditionally performed by young women in music halls and salons—into an art form. Sperling danced her first Fuller-style piece, "Butterfly Dance," in 1997. It was part of a collaboration with social dance historian and film choreographer Elizabeth Aldrich whom Sperling met while working on Oxford University Press's "International Encyclopedia of Dance." After that, says Sperling, "I wanted to do something that was in the style of Loie Fuller, but that was a modern choreography and that would work for a contemporary viewer." So she set about experimenting, using two of the elements central to Fuller's own dances: fabric and light.

Sperling's two latest pieces based on Fuller's skirt dances are "Dance of the Elements," which consists of a suite of dances, and "La Nuit." In "Dance of the Elements" Sperling transforms herself into an alternately billowing, flowing and spiraling figure representing earth, water, wind, fire and ether. In "La Nuit" she is covered in a black cape,

which she manipulates to great effect, eventually revealing a star-studded evening gown that mirrors the night sky. Sperling's use of fabric is mesmerizing, her layering of modern and past dance techniques is innovative, and she dances with remarkable grace and precision.

Most recently, says Sperling, she has become engrossed in another aspect of Fuller's life and work, one that perhaps connects more closely with Sperling's own past. Fuller, who suffered from several physical ailments, also had a role in a play called "Quack MD," in which she played a hypnotized patient. This play and an interest in stage hypnotism have inspired Sperling's latest piece, "Sympt-o-matic," in which, as Sperling explains it, she draws on "the idea of performing your own illness [that] becomes very important at the time." "Sympt-o-matic" opens with a question and answer session between patient and doctor and ends with the patient writhing in a sequence of convulsions. Sperling plays the doctor. The patient, played by Melissa Rodnon, is never still throughout the dance.

"Twentieth century bodies are different from 19th century bodies. The symptoms that you read about when you read about hysterics—that's just the way you would have a hysterical fit in the 19th century. But you wouldn't have a hysterical fit the same way today, because people express their physicality differently in every era," explains Sperling.

It is this sort of collapse or lapse in time that "Sympt-o-matic" evokes. But "Sympt-o-matic"—with its hysterical fits, its uncanny hypnotic movements and its projected shadows of a doctor's controlling hand—is a work that brings into play yet another layer of time, one that reaches beyond the history of dance and movement to Sperling's own family past.

Sperling's paternal grandparents, Otto and Melitta Sperling, were both psychoanalysts. And although Melitta died when Sperling was just three years old in 1973, Otto, a man who had studied with Freud—and who died just shy of 103 in 2002—was an important presence in Sperling's life.

Despite himself, it was Otto who inspired Sperling with a love of dance. "He loved the arts and he loved music particularly," says Sperling, and he used to take his young granddaughter to the ballet and concerts. Nevertheless, he thought that the arts did not make for proper professions, because they did not bring in a steady income. To discourage her from becoming an artist, Sperling's grandfather had certain stock cautionary tales that he used to repeat: "He would say things like when he was in *Gymnasium*, he loved Shakespeare and they would do Shakespeare plays. He had a very good memory, so he got the big parts, but he couldn't act," so, as the story goes, he never became an actor. Or "he would say he wrote poetry, but he was so glad someone told him he had no talent." "It was the money fear. His daughter became an artist," Sperling adds.

This fear of becoming destitute and the worry that his children or his granddaughter would not be able to support themselves, is a salient thread in Sperling's recollections of her grandfather. Like many fellow immigrants, Otto, who fled Vienna for New York in 1938, along with his wife and two young children, had to put in long hours to reestablish himself. The fear of being without means never left him.

Yet, for all his experiences and his long life, Otto was a quiet man, a listener, according to Sperling, who did not speak at length about his childhood and young adulthood in Vienna. "There was more of a forgetting or a moving on," she

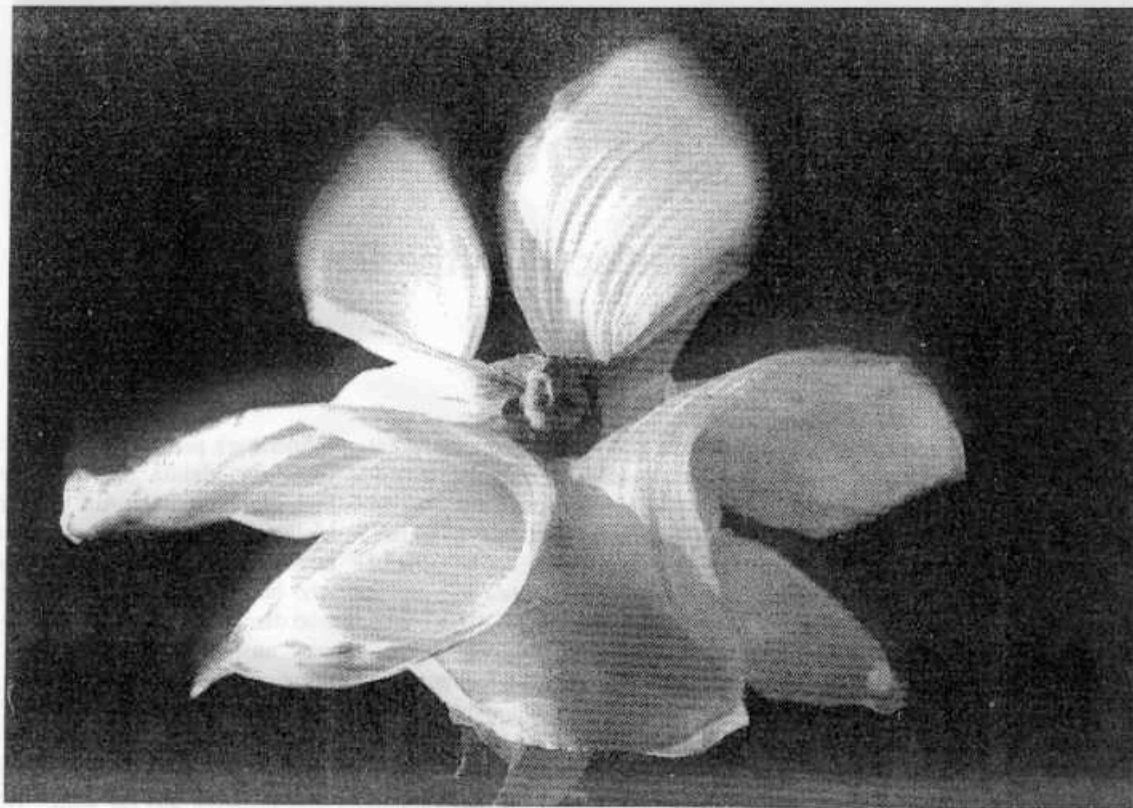


Photo: Mike Lamberger, 2015

Drawing on the work of the legendary dancer Loie Fuller, dancer and choreographer Jody Sperling uses light and fabric to represent the elements in "Dance of the Elements."

explains. "I became interested in it. I was taking a class on Freud in college and that was the first information. It was hard to get information out of him. You had to work and then you ended up with these stories that were more parables about why you should go to medical school." When Sperling recounts her family history, she remains unsure of certain facts.

Otto Sperling's family were Viennese Jews. His father, Simon, had been in the textile-trading business in Vienna. As a young man, he changed his last name to Sperling in an effort to further assimilate into Austrian society—and he served in the Austro-Hungarian army. Otto was born in 1899. Melitta, who was born in the same year, came to Vienna with her parents from Galicia. She too came from a Jewish family and had her name changed, from the Yiddish Malka to Melitta, in order to fit into the new environs.

Otto and Melitta were married "around 1926." Melitta had been studying pediatrics, but, as Sperling tells it, "according to Otto he persuaded her to become an analyst." She was doing her training analysis around the time of the *Anschluss*.

Otto, meanwhile, had become an analyst and was, according to family lore, attending seminars with Freud, although Sperling is unclear as to which seminars. "I know they

had a Wednesday night group, so I am assuming that this is what it was," she explains. After Otto's death, Sperling found some of his writings. "He wasn't a real writer. He was more of a practitioner, but I came across some article he wrote, like 'The Auto-Eroticism of Itching.' It's very old-school Freudian, because they were old-school Freudian," Sperling recounts, laughing at her grandfather's old-fashioned nature. She adds that Otto had a lithograph "signed by Sigmund" in his office, and that a painted portrait of Freud hung in Melitta's office.

Otto was, and remained, formal to the end of his days. "He was very well-mannered," recalls Sperling. "He always wore a three-piece suit. He was a small man. He was gracious. In the nursing home he would still wear a suit and tie and he would be gracious to the staff. I felt he believed he was in a spa in Switzerland or something." Sperling also describes Otto as a practical, unemotional man, who remarried a year after his first wife died, because, as she puts it, "He just assumed a man needed a wife, and he was a widower, and she took care of him."

One story that Otto apparently did like to tell of himself in the time before the war, was that he had read "Mein Kampf," and that "from his perspective of someone who knows

about people, he knew that this man was serious...and that he was a crazy person" who, given the chance, would carry out what he outlined in his book. So, Otto applied for a visa for the United States early on, in 1933. But because the Sperlings were young doctors with young children, they did not actually leave until 1938, after the *Anschluss*.

The Sperlings left Europe via Holland and managed to take a good deal of their belongings with them, which, Sperling says is "always curious to me." Since they were not allowed to take out cash or precious metals, the story goes that Otto had his wife's medical instruments cast into platinum. Sometime before they reached the American border, Otto and Melitta had the instruments melted down again, as it was against American law to import tools of the trade. During their first years in the U.S., the Sperlings lived off of these platinum bars.

The young immigrants first settled in an apartment on Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn, because they were told there were too many analysts in Manhattan. But in the 1950s they relocated to Park Avenue.

Melitta's specialty was treating children with psychosomatic illnesses, for which she became quite well known. According to Sperling, two volumes of her essays, pub-

lished posthumously, are still in print and serve as important textbooks on the subject.

Despite his parents' profession; or perhaps because of them, their son, Sperling's father George Sperling, grew up rather isolated. As his parents were preoccupied with reestablishing themselves in the United States, George and his sister, Eva, were very much left to their own devices. Even dinner was only a short break squeezed in between patient appointments.

George, too, sought to move on quickly from his Austrian past. Speaking German was not encouraged at home, so he soon forgot the language. And when an elementary school teacher commented on his "cute Viennese accent," he promptly set about disencumbering himself of it. George went on to study cognitive science and he has made a name for himself in the field of visual memory and perception. Sperling is the daughter of George and Iris Fodor, a psychologist who is on the faculty at New York University in Greenwich Village, New York, and who grew up in a family descended from communist Jews from Russia, representing yet another side of the Jewish experience.

Sperling grew up in Greenwich Village, shuttling between her mother's and her father's apartments. It was from these apartments—which afforded an excellent southern view of lower Manhattan—that Sperling, still an adolescent, first came to reflect on the changes she could see from her window over time and on time-lapse photography. "I always used to think about how all these buildings had gone up and how my view had changed. ... and with a time-lapse image you could see it. And now I look out the window and the only thing that I can see is what's not there."

Sperling expresses regret at not knowing enough German to be able to read all the papers left behind by her grandparents, but she says she feels no particular connection to Austria or Austrian culture today. Instead, she cites her grandfather's love of the arts and passion for psychoanalysis and her father's athleticism and interest in the visual, as conscious and unconscious influences on her.

And beyond that, "It's that interest in research and recovering memories and images from the past that motivates me."