

[l-r] Melanie Hedlund, Stefanie Cohen, and Neige Christenson in "Mother Trio," an improvisation about feeding their children, performed at the Boston May Jam, May 2000.

## THEY MOVE THROUGH US



video still: Sanford Lewis

exploring pathways from parenting to dancing and back again

by Neige Christenson  
Stefanie Cohen  
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**T**hey Move Through Us was an evening of improvised movement and spoken word performed in June 2000 at Green Street Studios in Cambridge, Massachusetts, by Neige Christenson, Stefanie Cohen, Melanie Hedlund, and Gene Broadway. This article is a collaboratively composed recollection of our experience rehearsing and performing together.

For the past few years, Neige Christenson, a dancer, improviser, and home-schooling mother of two young sons, has been investigating the ways in which her dancing and her mothering reflect, inform, and inspire each other. She has created both set choreography and pieces of structured improvisation based on her experience as a mother. She has danced to her own poetry, to the recorded words of her children, and to improvised text. In one piece, *The Things That Come Out Of My Mouth*, she played with the oft-repeated phrases of parenting, such as, "The sooner you get in your car seat, the sooner we can go," and "I can't hear either one of you if you are both talking to me at once," as well as the

ever-effective, "I don't care *who* started this fight, I want to see who can finish it!"

Last spring, Neige invited three other dancer/parents to join her in an exploration of movement and language based on this vital aspect of their identities. For the two months leading up to an informal performance at Green Street Studios, the four of us met twice weekly to move and witness each other. Joining Neige were Gene Broadway, a recently divorced father of four kids between eight and thirteen; Melanie Hedlund, a single mother of three kids, aged six, eleven, and fourteen; and me, Stefanie Cohen, a new mother of an infant son. The three women had been dancers and performers before they were mothers. Gene had been a father for years before he discovered he was also a dancer.

We started our ensemble work with a practice, a question, and an invitation. We began with the intention of ultimately creating a performance piece that stemmed from our experience as parents, and we also had a deep desire to remain connected with our individual processes. So, we began each



rehearsal with Authentic Movement practice: taking turns to witness each other, we would move contemplatively with eyes closed, surrendering to the stories of our bodies. Sometimes we would move in silence, sometimes inviting sound and language, occasionally in contact, and often on our own.

Our question was, is there a difference between moving with whatever comes up for us in the moment, and moving specifically focusing on the material of our parenting as source? Often our first dances of the day were about the complex disentanglements and arrangements that had enabled us to make it to rehearsal at all. As we began to move, it was invariably our children and our interactions with them that lay just below the surface of our skins.

The invitation from Neige was for us to consciously try to embody our children as well as ourselves in our movement sessions, to explore their words and gestures, to move freely from our own experience to theirs as we had witnessed and imagined them. The result, in our improvisations together, was a mixture of children's and parents' voices springing out of our moving bodies, calling and echoing, turning and touching, reacting to one another. What a relief to feel how much we each could bring to this, instead of having to leave it all at home. The material seemed boundless.

What voices came through? Ten kids, fourteen if we count our own kid-selves, and our many-headed demons and numerous advice-givers...

What follows is a collage of our writings from and about the process of working together on *They Move Through Us*.

*Stefanie Cohen*

**Neige:** How shall we describe the evolution of this work? We started out simply witnessing each other in Authentic Movement, and gradually introduced the intention of letting our children move through us. At first we moved with eyes closed, staying with our own stories as much as possible. Then, as the words came out, and the movers began to physically interact, more possibilities to overlap and interact, to play off of and react to each other, arose. Gradually we began to work with eyes open, partly to invite the future audience in, and partly just to have that visual information with which to make choices. But we still wanted our initial source and fountain to be from inner impulses and associations. We also wanted the words to grow out of the movement, and to keep our relationship to each other primarily physical, even as words entered the mix.

As we worked, usually in pairs or trios, we developed a group aesthetic, finding and discussing what was most compelling to us. We noticed, for instance, that we preferred to avoid direct dialogue between parent and child. It was hard to hang onto our own stories if we started trying to answer or fit into another's for too long. It seemed more interesting to see two or three different layers happening at once, intersecting wherever they might, without effort or conscious steering. We engaged in "parallel play," as our toddlers have done. When we did feel drawn to respond to one another, it was often



Gene Broadway and Stefanie Cohen in "Where I end and You begin," *They Move Through Us*, Green Street Studios, Cambridge, MA, June 2000.



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obliquely. At the same time, rapid associations and choruses (such as when all the mothers were saying "what if?" in various stages of worry over imagined perils to our children) were very satisfying, in the same way that unison movement can be.

**Melanie:** One of the questions I brought into this process was how to find a path from my creative work to my parenting, having noticed that my decisions on a dance floor are often more imaginative or engaging than my responses as a mother would be. Then, the question reversed. I began to explore how to create a path from my parenting into my dance process. This became surprisingly available once we began doing Authentic Movement. What I found was that the path goes both ways; not only was I bringing my experience of parenting into my AM sessions, but I was practicing being more observant, sensitive, and patient with my children from a deeper place in myself.

**Neige rehearsal journal:**

*First I felt an image of my five-year-old Laban sifting into my body. I'd been having such a hard time dealing patiently with his peeing in his pants, and now I went into his posture, clutching my pants, trying to deal with this penis and the pee that comes out of it without conscious permission. I felt the same*

*need for privacy that I've observed in him, cornered and betrayed by his own body (overlaid with my own memory of third grade when two boys and a girl cornered me to pull down my pants and see if I'd peed in them). This Curled-up Frustration dance moved seamlessly into an explosive Defiance-at-Bedtime dance, trying to keep sleep at bay, railing against tyrannical demands to stop playing and brush teeth. Then, blessed openness and surrender as sleep overtakes him, his face pure and relaxed as the full moon, teeth ungritted, fists unclenched.*

*Next I became my eight-year-old working on building a sand castle, crouched in concentration, seeing tiny guards and armies lining the top of the castle wall. Suddenly an invading toddler came and encroached on my private world, then actually walked through it all. I tried to draw more lines in the sand to keep this little invader out, but it didn't work. The rage that flares up in Hans, I felt it in my body, I let it out of my mouth.*

*The next time I see them go through these emotional progressions, I will be able to feel them with my own body's memory. It makes my everyday witnessing of them much more compassionate.*



"Mother Trio," *They Move Through Us*,  
June 2000.



video still: Sanford Lewis

**Melanie:** Our working structure, which intentionally included speaking, created a channel that became increasingly rich and complex. How can we utter words that remain authentic while being in the space with the words of others, avoiding the temptation to move out of our own experience to create dialogue? After all, dropping my own train of thought to answer another's call is something a mother does instinctively. I'd been doing it for years.

Sometimes our individual experiences resonated so clearly with each other's that our words appeared to create a dialogue. For example: Neige is navigating a difficult scene with her wild kids in a grocery store; she's a mother losing control; she is talking about stuffing them into jars and screwing the lids on tightly until they are all safely back in the car. Something she is saying about "be careful not to spill any" triggers a memory for me. I become a well-meaning sheriff who is investigating a car pulled off the road with a big, messy milkshake-spilling fight going on and a mother losing control inside there. My choice to take on the sheriff's role and to use this Voice of Authority to explore my memory proved very fruitful, as it stimulated quite a response from Neige's out-of-control mother.

Changing roles could also happen at any time without warning...

**Neige rehearsal journal:**

*The group improvisation is accelerating towards talk of bedtime. I'm suddenly trying to brush Gene's teeth, but he's too tall. I try to bend his knees but he won't kneel down. It's time for bed, I gotta get that cavity-making gunk off his little teeth; he already has a cavity, I just know it. I'm warning him not to bite the toothbrush. I'm climbing*

*up Gene's body, intent on submitting him to the treatment by force. He is being stubborn, but I will not be thwarted. Full steam ahead. (It is fantastic to have this big, strong guy to be doing this to. It gives me such freedom to get into it with my whole body, into my frustration at my son's resistance. Why must we have this fight twice a day every blessed day? Why won't he surrender to my toothbrush?) But then, when I've climbed all the way up to his face, and Gene does open his mouth, it is to calmly tell me, "It is time for bed, come on now honey," and there I am in his arms, instantly flipped by those words into a struggle against my own Papa, wanting him to carry me, but not to bed...*

*In that instant, I could take on my son's feelings of frustration at our power-struggle and embody his side of the fight, feeling invaded and pushed around, wanting physical closeness but on my own terms. I could have insisted that I was still the mother here and Gene should continue to be my child, but his choice not to answer as the child but to stay in his own story of putting his daughters to bed, enabled this great flip-twist to happen.*

**Melanie:** Sometimes I was trespassing into territory (mine or other's) that was too vulnerable to process at the time. We didn't try to solve anything but trusted each other to keep a strong container for our experiences. For example, when I got into my teenage son's attitude of "I REALLY DON'T WANT TO BE HERE AND YOU ALL ARE SO \$%#&%%&\* WEIRD," I imagined everyone else in the group feeling very uncomfortable with me. So I got to have the experience of being a teenage boy in an alienating moment.



**Neige rehearsal journal:**

*Witnessing Stef and Gene. They are warming up, doing a simple contact duet, pouring their weight back and forth, when an innocent comment by Gene reveals a rift between the experience of the new mother and the father of older children.*

*Gene: Ahhh! I don't have kids right now!*

*Stef: You can never "not have children"! How can you say that?*

*Gene: I mean they are not here right now. I can do whatever I want, whatever feels good.*

*Stef: No fair.*

*Her motherbody is full and rich arching over the support of a man who crouches or pivots or explores as he wishes. He's no longer wearing his parenthood as cellularly as she must. Each day, as a mother, when she breathes, blood pulses and milk gushes hot and tingly through her ducts for her baby. She sleeps, she wakes, she fades but still she's always holding him.*

**Stefanie rehearsal journal:**

*Where I end and You begin.*

*I realize after moving today what parallel experiences the baby and I are having right now. We are challenging our bodies, their capabilities, our strength, our independence and interdependence, our identities together and apart. I try to reclaim my body, woman's body, dancer's body. My memory is strong. Shane tries to sit, stand. His memory is distant but deep. A body that already knows how to stand and stretch, if only he could remember...*

**Neige:** Some of the themes which emerged in our rehearsals:

- Food, Feeding
- Merging / separation
- Time management / control
- Male and female experience of pregnancy and birth
- "Childing" and "Parenting" each other: e.g., cool things that happened when rapid shifts of role took place
- Mother of teens / mother of new baby: contrasts and parallels
- The frazzled Mom meets the Advice-Givers
- I'm sorry
- New relationship to sleep

We were so drawn to this luxurious rehearsal exploration that as the performance date neared, we were loathe to spend our time together "planning" or "scripting" the evening too much. So we simply decided to have a Mother Trio with a food theme, an assortment of duets and solos with varying degrees of preset structure, and then a nice fat open improvisation with all of us. We fretted a bit, wondering what exactly would come to the surface when we had an audience. Ultimately, we trusted in our sensitivity to each other, and in the richness of what we had experienced in rehearsal.

video still: Sanford Lewis



[l-r] Neige Christenson, Melanie Hedlund, and Stefanie Cohen in "Mother Trio," *They Move Through Us*, Green Street Studios, Cambridge, MA, June 2000.



**Gene:** When Neige asked me to join her in performing a piece about parenting, I was very excited to do anything with her... I just started doing Contact Improvisation a couple of years ago, and I love it, but the others were all experienced performers and I had never performed before, so I was quite intimidated by the prospect. One morning at the end of rehearsal, Stefanie said she'd like to hear more from me, encouraging me to express more of my fathering role in our explorations, and with more volume, so an audience could hear me. I had only recently learned to speak while moving and hadn't yet learned how to project my voice to an audience. I have only just begun to identify my own feelings about my life in the past couple of years, and it's a difficult and personal process. I was just beginning to be more comfortable with this new process of sharing with my three dance partners. Stefanie's comment made me realize that in performing I would be sharing with dozens of other people, most of whom I did not know. This was a moment of introspection for me. Not only was I trying to overcome my inhibitions as a man sharing my deepest feelings with three women, but trying to speak loudly enough for everyone at the performance to hear me, and being the *only* man in the room doing that!

**Neige:** We all wondered how we would be perceived, whether the audience would expect us to represent the full range and breadth of our parenting experience. Would we expose ourselves to misinterpretation and judgment; would the audience think I *really do* want to bottle my children in jars at the check-out counter if they grab for candy one more time? We decided to include other pieces in the evening, which we thought would provide some balance. Stefanie had written a poem in rehearsal and she danced a contact duet with Gene, as Melanie and I read her words aloud. Gene and I danced a duet entitled, "Cannon/Canon." For this we used a soundtrack of my son Hans talking about the trials and errors of an invention he was working on at home. As an engineer, Gene was attracted to this experiment as he was inspired by the way Hans' curiosity and analytical exploration bubbled out in his

voice. We approached our dance with a similar quality, exploring and manipulating each other's bodies, and finding some wonderful accidental parallels with what Hansi was saying.

**Stefanie:** One aspect of the process that stands out for me was that I was the only one of the four of us with a preverbal child. So, in rehearsals, when others were able to shift easily back and forth between their children's voices and their own, I felt as though I was missing a step. I could only take on Shane's physicality and wrestle with my own, rapidly shifting physical and emotional states. Perhaps what I was expressing physically could not be understood without the illumination of language. Sometimes I felt a frustration with this that I imagine might have mirrored Shane's irritation at not always being able to communicate his needs.

Gradually, I found that introducing the voices of advice-givers (from books, magazines, family, and other acquaintances) was a way to welcome in the humor that inevitably grew to be such a big part of the performance. This was an opportunity for me to work with the raw material of my early difficulties as a nursing mother and to simultaneously step outside of that experience, as a performer. Performing this work, as is my experience with most improvisation, felt not like an end to the "process," but certainly like a vital extension of it.

**Neige:** One thing I find cathartic about this way of working is the permission to exaggerate and amplify everyday experiences and feelings to see where they will go, to explore their absurdity and irony. I had been working this way in solo performance, and although I enjoyed holding the reins by myself, doing this with others made fugues and choruses and contrasts and big surprises possible.

**Melanie:** It was important to me to perform this material rather than just use this process as a wonderful creative/therapeutic tool. In performing, we are creating an experience for an audience. We are inviting them into a state of attention and transformation. The result, according to some audience



members, was an opportunity for those people who have devoted much of their lives to parenting, to feel acknowledged and understood. They were given a chance to cry, laugh, and perhaps forgive themselves a bit.

**Neige:** I was delighted to discover the audience responding so audibly. Perhaps they laugh because they recognize themselves and those frustrations or poignant pulls, those impossible situations, those conflicting and overwhelming feelings. When I was performing about a lonely moment as a mother, it was wonderful to hear people listening to me. And when I truly let myself become my inner Troll Hag, force-feeding questionable dinner items to her children, it was quite satisfying indeed.



*NOTE: We are continuing this exploration and will be performing and offering workshops in Boston to parents interested in investigating this territory. An unedited video of the performance is available, contact Neige.*

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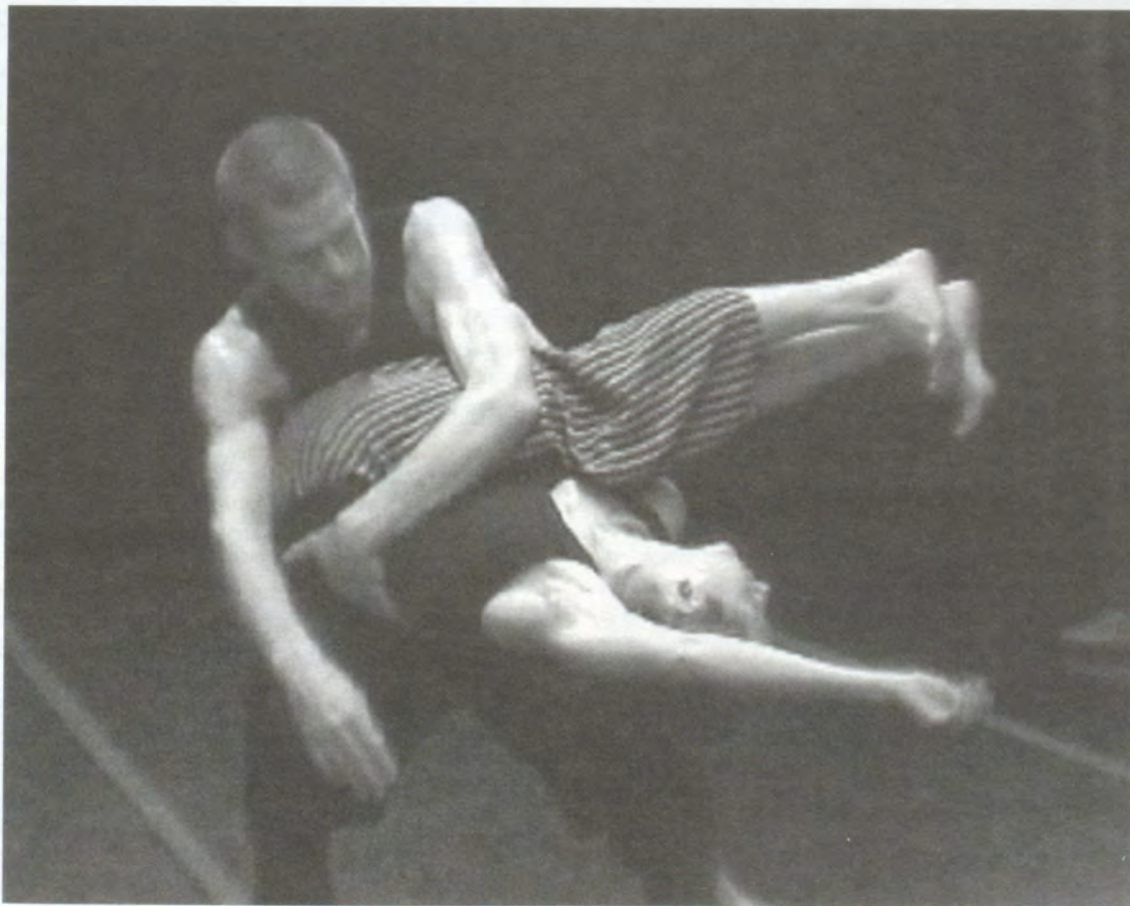
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**Gene Broadway and Neige Christenson in "Cannon/Canon," *They Move Through Us*, Green Street Studios, Cambridge, MA, June 2000.**