

# Loving America and Voting With His Feet

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dance? Do your older pieces tell you things about yourself when you look at them later on?

**TAYLOR** I hope not. I like to think that I don't do autobiographical dances. Whatever is in the dance is just stuff I've noticed around me. I'm not trying to express my personal life, really. Of course I have attitudes, and they're bound to get into a piece.

**TEACHOUT** But the dances you've been making in the last few years, the ones like "Black Tuesday" that seem to be about a particular moment in American history, surely they embody some kind of personal feelings about those historical moments?

**TAYLOR** I don't remember much about the Depression. I was very young, believe it or not. I did have to find out about some of the 30's dances that I used in "Black Tuesday," but they were still jitterbugging by the time I was in high school, so I remember that.

**TEACHOUT** Then it was the actual steps that attracted you, rather than wanting to say something about the past through the steps?

**TAYLOR** In fact, the whole thing came out of the songs. I usually start working on a dance by looking for music. Actually, I start by looking at the repertory. I think about what type of piece we might need, whether it's a dancey dance or something dark and ugly, or maybe funny. It always starts with practical needs, not some kind of inspiration that hits me. For "Black Tuesday," I listened to a lot of wonderful songs from the 30's. Usually, I sit down and think, oh-oh, it's two days until the rehearsal period starts and I haven't found the music. I'd better listen to something! I mean, I love to listen to music, I keep the radio on all the time, but I'm not listening seriously, I'm listening for fun. When I'm listening for a dance, though, I have to listen hard. That's my work.

**TEACHOUT** In "Private Domain," your autobiography, you talk about how "From Sea to Shining Sea" takes a "backwards, sideways and

askance" view of America.

**TAYLOR** I try to give more than one view of things. I'm afraid of preaching. Everybody has various opinions about things, and so I try to look at them from different sides. I like to think of myself as a reporter, not a preacher.

**TEACHOUT** What are you reporting on these days? Memories? Fresh observations?

**TAYLOR** I think both. Things I've read, things I've seen. I'm a collector. The boxes on the walls of this room are another aspect of what I do in my dances: I find trash, things that have been thrown out, and frame it. I like Joseph Cornell's work. I knew him. We weren't friends, but all the artists knew each other back in the 50's and 60's, all the painters and poets and some musicians. I don't know how I was included. There weren't many dancers.

**TEACHOUT** You also talk about how you're interested in the way America combines "puritanism and free spirit."

**TAYLOR** Yeah, doesn't it, though? Martha Graham was a good example of that.

**TEACHOUT** Of course you know that from experience, having danced in her company. But what about yourself?

**TAYLOR** I'm a special case. A little different from a lot of people. I'm really an outsider. I look. I watch. My work has always been the most important thing to me. That can be very isolating, and as I get older, the age difference between me and the people I work with is greater. That's another kind of separation.

**TEACHOUT** At one point in "Private Domain," you mention your "renunciation of the charismatic view of self." This idea seems to mesh with many of your dances that revolve around specifically charismatic figures, like "Speaking in Tongues."

**TAYLOR** The first person that makes me think of, of course, is Martha. She was like a witch! So interesting, and such a performer. She was "on" most of the time. She hypnotized

people with her personality. And I loved Martha, but from the very beginning I thought the whole thing was ridiculous. Really kind of funny — though at the same time, kind of wonderful, too. I think the reason we got along was because she knew I knew, and her stuff wasn't working on me. She kind of liked that.

**TEACHOUT** You sound like a man who takes an impersonal view of art.

**TAYLOR** I have mixed feelings about art with a capital A. I don't like to think of what I do as "art." It makes me back off. Now, that's my Puritan heritage speaking. Art is hoity-toity. Art is for aesthetes. Gentlemanly, good people don't concern themselves with those kinds of things.

**TEACHOUT** Another thing Puritans tend to think about art is that it's not

acceptable unless it serves a larger purpose. It has to have a moral or teach something useful.

**TAYLOR** Yes. I don't believe that. We're brought up by our parents to believe what they believe, but I never did. I was aware of what was expected of me, but I never thought I had to be that. I couldn't.

**TEACHOUT** Do you see yourself as someone who loves America?

**TAYLOR** Oh, yes! Remember, I've traveled a lot, and when you see other countries, you know how lucky you are to live here. Though I don't mind being critical of certain things. I mean, you don't like other people to say bad things about this country, but if we want to say them, that's all right. Right? □



Jack Vartoogian

*Karla Wolfangle performing in Paul Taylor's "Danbury Mix" during the final rehearsal before its world premiere in 1989 in New York City.*