

Also by Twyla Tharp  
*Push Comes to Shove: An Autobiography*

**TWYLA THARP**  
**THE CREATIVE HABIT**  
**LEARN IT AND USE IT FOR LIFE**

A PRACTICAL GUIDE

**WITH MARK REITER**

SIMON & SCHUSTER  
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### Where's Your "Pencil"?

In his lovely essay "Why Write?," the novelist Paul Auster tells a story about growing up as an eight-year-old in New York City and being obsessed with baseball, particularly the New York Giants. The only thing he remembers about attending his first major league baseball game at the Polo Grounds with his parents and friends is that he saw his idol, Willie Mays, outside the players' locker room after the game. The young Auster screwed up his courage and approached the great centerfielder. "Mr. Mays," he said, "could I please have your autograph?"

"Sure, kid, sure," the obliging Mays replied. "You got a pencil?"

Auster didn't have a pencil on him, neither did his father or his mother or anyone else in his group.

Mays waited patiently, but when it became obvious that no one present had anything to write with, he shrugged and said, "Sorry, kid. Ain't got no pencil, can't give no autograph."

From that day on, Auster made it a habit to never leave the house without a pencil in his pocket. "It's not that I had any particular plans for that pencil," Auster writes, "but I didn't want to be unprepared. I had been caught empty-handed once, and I

wasn't about to let it happen again. If nothing else, the years have taught me this: If there's a pencil in your pocket, there's a good chance that one day you'll feel tempted to start using it. As I like to tell my children, that's how I became a writer."

What is your pencil? What is the one tool that feeds your creativity and is so essential that without it you feel naked and unprepared?

A Manhattan writer I know never leaves his apartment without reminding himself to "come back with a face." Whether he's walking down the street or sitting on a park bench or riding the subway or standing on a checkout line, he looks for a compelling face and works up a rich description of it in his mind. When he has a moment, he writes it all down in his notebook. Not only does the exercise warm up his descriptive powers, but studying the crags, lines, and bumps of a stranger's face forces him to imagine that individual's life. Sometimes, if he's lucky, the writer attaches a complete biography to the face, and then a name, and then a narrative. Before he knows it, he has the ingredients for a full-fledged story.

I know cartoonists who always carry pen and pad to sketch what they see, photographers who always have a camera in their pockets, composers who carry Dictaphones to capture a snatch of vagabond melody that pops into their heads. They are always prepared.

Pick your "pencil" and don't leave home without it.

## Build Up Your Tolerance for Solitude

Some people are autophobic. They're afraid to be alone. The thought of going into a room to work all by themselves pains them in a way that is, at first, paralyzing within the room, and then keeps them from entering the room altogether.

It's not the solitude that slays a creative person. It's all that solitude *without a purpose*. You're alone, you're suffering, and you don't have a good reason for putting yourself through that misery. To build up your tolerance for solitude, you need a goal.

Sit alone in a room and let your thoughts go wherever they will. Do this for one minute. (Anyone can handle one minute of daydreaming.) Work up to ten minutes a day of this mindless mental wandering. Then start paying attention to your thoughts to see if a word or goal materializes. If it doesn't, extend the exercise to eleven minutes,

then twelve, then thirteen . . . until you find the length of time you need to ensure that something interesting will come to mind. The Gaelic phrase for this state of mind is "quietness without loneliness."

Note that this activity is the exact opposite of meditation. You are not trying to empty your mind, not trying to sit restfully without conscious thoughts. You're seeking thoughts from the unconscious, and trying to tease them forward until you can latch onto them. An idea will sneak into your brain. Get engaged with that idea, play with it, push it around—you've acquired a goal to underpin this solitary activity. You're not alone anymore; your goal, your idea, is your companion.

Consider fishing, also a solitary activity. You have the gear and the equipment. You have the flies in the tackle box. You have the boat and the trip you have to take on the water to where the fish are biting. You have the casting over and over again, and the interior musings about how long it's going to take you to get a bite on the line. And you're doing this all by yourself for hours! What elevates it, what keeps it from turning into frightening drudgery, of course, is that you have a goal. You want to catch fish.

It's the same with daydreaming creatively—minus the tackle box, the boat, and the fish. You're never lonely when your mind is engaged.

Alone is a fact, a condition where no one else is around. Lonely is how you feel about that. Think of five things that you like to do all by yourself. It could be a hot bath, a walk up a favorite hill, that quiet moment of sinking into a chair with coffee when the kids have left for school. Refer back to the list whenever the aloneness of the creative process seems too much for you. The pleasant memories will remind you that *alone* and *lonely* are not the same thing.

Solitude is an unavoidable part of creativity. Self-reliance is a happy by-product.

## Face Your Fears

It's not only Nature that abhors a vacuum; fear of empty space affects everyone in every creative situation. Where there was nothing, there will be something that has come from within you. That's a scary proposition. Putting a name to your fears helps cut them down to size.

When you sat in that brainstorming session at work, why didn't you speak up? When that idea for a story flitted through your mind, why didn't you seize it and pursue it? After you started drawing in that sketchbook, why did you stop?

I've told you my five big fears. Here are a few that might be yours:

*I'm not sure how to do it:* A problem, obviously, but we're not talking about constructing the Brooklyn Bridge. If you try and it doesn't work, you'll try a different way next time. Doing is better than not doing, and if you do something badly you'll learn to do it better.

*People will think less of me:* Not people who matter. Your friends will still love you, your children will still call you "mommy," your dog will still go for walks with you.

*It may take too much time:* Yes, it may, but putting it off isn't going to make it happen faster. The golfer Ben Hogan said, "Every day you don't practice you're one day further from being good." If it's something you want to do, make the time.

*It will cost money:* Are your creative efforts worth it to you? Is it something you really want to do? If so, make it your priority. Work around it. Once your basic needs are taken care of, money is there to be used. What better investment than in yourself?

*It's self-indulgent:* So? How often do you indulge yourself? Why shouldn't you? You won't be of much value to others if you don't learn to value yourself and your efforts.

These are some of the best, most paralyzing fears. If you examine your concerns closely, you should be able to identify and break down the ones that are holding you back. Don't run away from them or ignore them; write them down and save the page. There's nothing wrong with fear; the only mistake is to let it stop you in your tracks.

## Give Me One Week Without

People go on diets all the time. If they don't like their weight, they stop eating certain foods. If their spending is out of control, they lock away their credit cards. If they need quiet time at home, they take the phone off the hook. These are all diets of one kind or another. Why not do the same for your creative health? Take a week off from clutter and distractions, such as these:

**Mirrors:** Go a week without looking in the mirror. See what happens to your sense of self. Instead of relying on the image you see reflected in a glass, find your identity in other ways. This forces you to stop looking at yourself so much and start focusing on others. You'll be forced to think more about what you do, and less about how you look. There's a difference between how you see yourself and how you think others see you; you might get confirmation back or you might be surprised. Either way, it's a discovery process. It's also a great technique for heightening your sense of curiosity. I guarantee that after a week without mirrors, you'll be dying to see yourself again. It could be a very interesting reintroduction. You might meet someone totally new.

**Clocks:** Put away your wristwatch. Shield your eyes from clocks. Stop relying on timepieces to gauge the passing of time. If you're engaged in what you're doing, time doesn't matter. It passes swiftly without notice. If you're not engaged, the clock will only depress you more. It tells you what you already know: You're in a rut and things aren't working. You don't need that negativity.

**Newspapers:** Stop reading newspapers and magazines for a week. I don't recommend this as a permanent diet; it eventually breeds ignorance. But one week won't do much damage. It's like going on vacation to a remote island, cut off from the usual media clutter. You may have done that already in your life. What have you lost? More important, what have you gained?

**Speaking:** I know a soprano who nearly ravaged her beautiful voice during a run of difficult opera performances. The cure was three weeks without speaking while her vocal cords recuperated. She enjoyed the self-imposed silence so much, she now has a no-speaking ritual for one week every year. It's not only a rest for her chief artistic muscle—her voice—it's also a stark reminder of the difference between what's worth saying and what isn't. It's the perfect editor for the creative soul.

Once you've done without these four, it's easy to come up with other distractions that invade your creative life without enhancing it. The telephone. The computer. The coffee shop. The car. The television (!). You get the idea. There are a lot of distractions out there—and you can live without them. At least for a little while.

# scratching

The first steps of a creative act are like groping in the dark: random and chaotic, feverish and fearful, a lot of busy-ness with no apparent or definable end in sight. There is nothing yet to research. For me, these moments are not pretty. I look like a desperate woman, tortured by the simple message thumping away in my head: “You need an idea.” It’s not enough for me to walk into a studio and start dancing, hoping that something good will come of my aimless cavorting on the studio floor. Creativity doesn’t generally work that way for me. (The rare times when it has stand out like April blizzards.) You can’t just dance or paint or write or sculpt. Those are just verbs. You need a tangible idea to get you going. The idea, however minuscule, is what turns the verb into a noun—paint into a painting, sculpt into sculpture, write into writing, dance into a dance.

Even though I look desperate, I don’t feel desperate, because I have a habitual routine to keep me going.

I call it scratching. You know how you scratch away at a lottery ticket to see if you’ve won? That’s what I’m doing when I begin a piece. I’m digging through everything to find something. It’s like clawing at the side of a mountain to get a toehold, a grip, some sort of traction to keep moving upward and onward.

Scratching takes many shapes. A fashion designer is scratching when he visits vintage clothing stores, studies music videos, and parks himself at a sidewalk cafe to see what the pedestrians are wearing.

A film director is scratching when she grabs a flight to Rome, trusting that she will get her next big idea in that inspiring city. The act of changing your environment is the scratch.

An architect is scratching when he walks through a rock quarry, studying the algebraic connections of fallen rocks or the surface of a rock wall, or the sweeping space of the quarry itself. We see rocks; the architect sees space and feels texture and assesses building materials. All this sensory input may yield an idea.

You can scratch through books. I once walked into the office of a four-star Manhattan chef and his assistant as they were scouring through an enormous pile of international cookbooks, none of them in English as far as I could tell, obviously looking for menu ideas. They had a dazed, sheepish look in their eyes—dazed because I had interrupted them as they were zoning out in their pursuit of a good idea, sheepish because no one likes to be caught in the act of scratching.

Scratching can look like borrowing or appropriating, but it’s an essential part of creativity. It’s primal, and very private. It’s a way of saying to the gods, “Oh, don’t mind me, I’ll just wander around in these back hallways . . .” and then grabbing that piece of fire and running like hell.

I’m often asked, “Where do you get your ideas?” This happens to anyone who is willing to stand in front of an audience and talk about his or her work. The short answer is: everywhere. It’s like asking “Where do you find the air you breathe?” Ideas are all around you.

I hesitate to wax eloquent about the omnipresence of ideas and how everything we need to make something out of nothing—tell a story, design a building,

hum a melody—already resides within us in our experience, memories, taste, judgment, critical demeanor, humanity, purpose, and humor. I hesitate because it is so blindingly obvious. If I'm going to be a cheerleader for the creative urge, let it be for something other than the oft-repeated notion that ideas are everywhere.

What people are really asking, I suspect, is not "Where do you get your ideas?" but "*How* do you get them?"

To answer that, you first have to appreciate what an idea is.

Ideas take on many forms. There are good ideas and bad ideas. Big ideas and little ideas.

A good idea is one that turns you on rather than shuts you off. It keeps generating more ideas and they improve on one another. A bad idea closes doors instead of opening them. It's confining and restrictive. The line between good and bad ideas is very thin. A bad idea in the hands of the right person can easily be tweaked into a good idea.

I like the following exchange between the movie producer Art Linson and the writer David Mamet, as Linson recorded it in his book of Hollywood tales, *What Just Happened?*:

*The first rule of producing is to find a writer with an idea, or get an idea and find a writer. Since David Mamet and I had done The Untouchables together we'd developed a good professional working relationship: You get me a lot of money, I get you a good script.*

*I placed the call: "Hi, Dave."*

*"What's the shot?" he asked.*

*"I got a new deal. I'm looking for you to write a new script."*

*"Fine."*

*"There'll be lots of money."*

*"Good. Let's do it."*

*"It's not that easy."*

*"Why?"*

*"Because if you don't tell me what it's about I can't get you the money."*

*"Fine. What do you want it to be about?"*

*"I don't know, that's why I'm calling you."*

*"I understand."*

*"Dave, how about an adventure movie?"*

*"Fine."*

*"Something castable. Two guys, maybe."*

*"Fine."*

*"C'mon, Dave, I need more to go on."*

*"O.K. . . . How 'bout two guys and a bear?"*

*"It's a start."*

In Hollywood, an adventure movie with two guys doesn't quite qualify as an idea. Two guys and a bear does. It adheres to the unshakable rule that you don't have a really good idea until you combine two little ideas. Like all good ideas, it kept moving forward, eventually evolving into the movie *The Edge* with Anthony Hopkins and Alec Baldwin.

The difference between good and bad ideas is a lot like E. M. Forster's distinction between narrative and plot. Plot is "The queen died; the king died." Narrative is "The queen died; the king died of a broken heart." One man's bear is another's brokenhearted king. That is all you need to know about good ideas and bad.

The more useful comparison involves big ideas and little ideas.

You (and by "you" I mean both you and me, dear reader) don't scratch for big ideas. They come upon you mysteriously, unbidden, sometimes unwelcome (especially when they become impossible to execute). There is always an ulterior motive behind a big idea, usually that you want to catch people's attention, or make a pile of money, or both. Big ideas are self-contained and self-defining projects. I get them once or twice a year whenever I start to fret about the impermanence of my craft and want to make something enduring. I want people to remember I was here.

For me, a big idea is thinking I can film, preserve, and archive all my dances and calling it the “Decades” project. A big idea is waking up one day and telling myself I want to make a Broadway musical to the songs of Billy Joel. They are big ideas because they take up a lot of space in my mind, and if I commit to them, they will be all-consuming. They are big ideas because, in and of themselves, they are meaningless, little more than a goal or a dream; they cease to exist if I fail to follow up on them with the steady string of small ideas that make each a reality. For the musical, if I can’t figure out a way to speak to Billy Joel and get his cooperation, if I can’t select the right songs, if I can’t construct a recognizable story line to tie the songs together, if I can’t create the dance steps and find the best dancers and persuade people with money to back the show, and so on and so on with thousands of other daily sparks and imaginings and choices . . . then the big idea quickly shrivels and evaporates into nothing.

That is why you scratch for little ideas. Without the little ideas, there are no big ideas.

Scratching is what you do when you can’t wait for the thunderbolt to hit you. As Freud said, “When inspiration does not come to me, I go halfway to meet it.” How is that different from a movie producer calling up a gifted writer and prodding him to suggest a plot line of “two men and a bear”? If you go halfway, you double your chances of getting a toehold on an idea.

Remember this when you’re struggling for a big idea. You’re much better off scratching for a small one.

In *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Robert Pirsig describes an experience he had teaching rhetoric to college students in Bozeman, Montana. One girl, a serious and disciplined student often described by her teachers as lacking creativity, wanted to write a five-hundred-word essay about the United States. Pirsig opined that this was rather broad, and suggested that she narrow it to the town of Bozeman. When the paper came due, she arrived empty-handed and very upset, explaining that she’d tried but that she couldn’t think of anything to say.

Pirsig next advised that she narrow it further to the main street of Bozeman. Again, she came in without an essay and in obvious distress. This time,

*he told her angrily, “Narrow it down to the front of one building on the main street of Bozeman. The Opera House. Start with the upper left-hand brick.”*

*Her eyes, behind the thick-lensed glasses, opened wide. She came in the next class with a puzzled look and handed him a five-thousand-word essay on the front of the Opera House on the main street of Bozeman, Montana. “I sat in the hamburger stand across the street,” she said, “and started writing about the first brick, and the second brick, and then by the third brick it all started to come and I couldn’t stop.”*

When you’re in scratching mode, the tiniest microcell of an idea will get you going. Musicians know this because compositions rarely come to them whole and complete. They call their morsels of inspiration lines or riffs or hooks or licks. That’s what they look for when they scratch for an idea.

It’s the same for me. A dance doesn’t hit me whole and complete. Inspiration comes in molecules of movement, sometimes in nanoseconds. A quick combination of three steps is an idea. A turn of the foot coupled with an arm gesture is an idea. A new way of collapsing to the floor is an idea. A man grabbing a woman above the elbow is an idea. A quick combination of five steps leading into a jump is practically a mega-idea—enough to keep me going for hours.

When I’m scratching I’m improvising. Like a jazz musician jamming for an hour to find a few interesting notes, a choreographer looks for interesting movement. I didn’t start out knowing this; it came to me over time, as I realized that I would never get to the essential core of movement and dance through a cerebral process. I could prepare, order, organize, structure, and edit my creativity in my head, but I couldn’t think my way into a dance. To generate ideas, I had to *move*. It’s the same if you’re a painter: You can’t imagine the work, you can only generate ideas when you put pencil to paper, brush to canvas—when you actually do something physical.



Here's how I learned to improvise: I played some music in the studio and I started to move. It sounds obvious, but I wonder how many people, whatever their medium, appreciate the gift of improvisation. It's your one opportunity in life to be completely free, with no responsibilities and no consequences. You don't have to be good or great or even interesting. It's you alone, with no one watching or judging. If anything comes of it, you decide whether the world gets to see it. In essence, you are giving yourself permission to daydream during working hours.

I suppose this is no different from a songwriter noodling around at the keyboard waiting for a corpuscle of music to emerge and engage the ear, or a painter dashing off sketches right and left until one pleases the eye. That's what improvising is like for me. There's no tollbooth between my impulse and my action. I just do it and I consider the results, the consequences, and the truth (if any) later in repose. That's an incredible place to be. If you're privileged enough to be able to do that for forty-five minutes a few days a week, you have been given something wonderful.

There was one big problem with my improvisation: I couldn't see the results. A painter has those sketches littering the floor to look at later. A writer can read what's been written. A composer can jot down the notes that enticed his ear. I didn't have a way to capture my improvising when I started out (this was the 1960s, before the invention of portable video). It bothered me that I was wasting a lot of good movement in the studio. So I trained myself, through muscle memory, to remember my improvised steps. I called it going into "capture mode." Then I realized that I was defeating the purpose of improvisation, because once I asked my mind to *retain*, it was no longer free to improvise *without inhibition*. They were opposed activities, freezing me in place. The act of retaining defeated the purpose of scratching, which was to stop my conscious mind and mental filters from blocking my creative impulses.

I want to be clear here. When I talk about turning off the conscious mind and mental filters, I am not talking about meditating or mining the subconscious. Scratching is real and tangible. It bloodies your fingernails. The key is not to block

yourself; you have to leave yourself open to everything. When he needed an idea, Thomas Edison liked to sit in a "thinking chair" holding a metal ball bearing in each palm, with his hands closed. On the floor, directly under his hands, were two metal pie pans. Edison would close his eyes and allow his body to relax. Somewhere between consciousness and dreaming his hands would relax and open without effort, letting the ball bearing fall noisily into the pie pans. That's when he would wake up and write down whatever idea was in his head at that moment. It was his way of coming up with ideas without his conscious mind censoring them.

The Harvard psychologist Stephen Kosslyn says that ideas can be acted upon in four ways. First, you must *generate* the idea, usually from memory or experience or activity. Then you have to *retain* it—that is, hold it steady in your mind and keep it from disappearing. Then you have to *inspect* it—study it and make inferences about it. Finally, you have to be able to *transform* it—alter it in some way to suit your higher purposes.

Some people are good at some of these but not all four. They can generate an idea, but they can't hold on to it or transform it. My problem was that I was generating a lot of ideas, but generating was at odds with my need to retain, inspect, and transform. That's when I discovered the video camera, which is the technical heart of much of my scratching. When I improvise in a studio, alone or with other dancers, I always have a video camera getting everything on tape, so I can review it later. For me, scratching for ideas became a technical scheme of improvising (generating ideas), getting them on tape (retaining), watching the tapes later on (inspecting), and finding a way to use them in a dance (transforming).

There are as many ways to scratch for ideas as there are ideas:

The most common is **reading**. If you're like me, reading is your first line of defense against an empty head. It's how you learned as a child. It's how you absorb difficult information. It's how you keep your mind disciplined. If you monitor your reading assiduously, it's even how you grade your brain's conditioning; like an athlete in training, the more you read, the more mentally fit you feel. It

doesn't matter if it's a book, magazine, newspaper, billboard, instruction manual, or cereal box—reading generates ideas, because you're literally filling your head with ideas and letting your imagination filter them for something useful. If I stopped reading, I'd stop thinking. It's that simple.

For a certain type of artist, particularly storytellers and songwriters, **everyday conversation** is scratching. If you listen, you will hear ideas. I always liked Paul McCartney's explanation of how he and John Lennon wrote "Eight Days a Week." McCartney was in a chauffeur-driven car on his way to Lennon's suburban home to work with him. He asked the driver, "How've you been?" "Working hard," said the driver, "working eight days a week." McCartney had never heard the phrase before and mentioned it to Lennon as they sat down to work. "Right," said Lennon, and instantly launched into "Ooh, I need your lovin' . . ." They wrote the song on the spot.

You can scratch for ideas by enjoying other **people's handiwork**, whether it's in a museum or a theater or an exhibition. When his operettas began to lose the public's favor, W. S. Gilbert, the wordsmithing half of Gilbert and Sullivan, grew desperate for a bold reinvention of the form—or at least a good idea. He got it by attending a London exhibition of Japanese culture. This gave Gilbert the idea for *The Mikado*, inspired his partner Arthur Sullivan to compose his greatest score, and linked into a wave of Japanophilia rolling through Europe. All because of a visit to an exhibition.

You can also scratch in the footsteps of your **mentors and heroes**, using their paradigms as a starting point for ideas. But you have to be careful. When I was beginning, I would sometimes find myself solving problems in exactly the same way that teachers such as Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham solved them. I would catch myself and say, "Wait a minute. That's how Martha or Merce would do it. We can't have that." Scratching among the

paradigms is a dangerous habit if it turns you into an imitator rather than a creator.

You can scratch amid **nature**. Mozart and Beethoven, for example, were ardent bird lovers. They would get musical motifs from listening to birds. Bird songs don't do the same for me. I would have to see a bird move—how it waddles, how it stays close to its center, how it flies—to spark an idea. But an actor might get an idea about character by studying the carriage of a bird. A painter would study the bird's coloring.

Reading, conversation, environment, culture, heroes, mentors, nature—all are lottery tickets for creativity. Scratch away at them and you'll find out how big a prize you've won.

The tricky part about scratching, however, is that you can't stop with one idea. Henry James said that genius is the act of perceiving similarity among disparate things. In the empty room you're trying to connect the dots, linking A to B to C to maybe come up with H. Scratching is a means to identifying A, and if you can get to A, you've got a grip on the slippery rock wall. You've got purchase. You can move on to B, which is mandatory. You cannot stop with one idea. You don't really have a workable idea until you combine two ideas.

It's a simple dynamic. If you want to see it dramatized, watch Mike Nichols's 1988 film *Working Girl*. It is ostensibly a Manhattan fairy tale about a lower-middle-class woman (played by Melanie Griffith) trying to climb out of the secretarial pool at an investment bank and win her prince charming (Harrison Ford). But it's infinitely more interesting if you see it as a movie about creativity. This "working girl" knows how to scratch. She gets ideas everywhere. She reads a gossip item about a radio disc jockey. She also sees a business magazine piece about a conglomerate on the prowl for acquisitions, and an item about its founder's daughter getting married. She puts the ideas together and tries to broker a deal for the conglomerate to acquire a radio network. At the end, she's

challenged to describe how she came up with the plan for the acquisition. It's a telling scene. She has just been fired. On her way out of the building, with all her files and personal items packed in a box (a box just like mine!), she gets a chance to explain her thought process to the mogul:

*See? This is Forbes. It's just your basic article about how you were looking to expand into broadcasting. Right? Okay now. The same day—I'll never forget this—I'm reading Page Six of the New York Post and there's this item on Bobby Stein, the radio talk show guy who does all those gross jokes about Ethiopia and the Betty Ford Center. Well, anyway, he's hosting this charity auction that night. Real bluebloods and won't that be funny? Now I turn the page to Suzy who does the society stuff and there's this picture of your daughter—see, nice picture—and she's helping to organize the charity ball. So I started to think: Trask, Radio, Trask, Radio. . . . So now here we are.*

He's impressed and hires her on the spot. Forget the fairy-tale plot; as a demonstration of how to link A to B and come up with C, *Working Girl* is a primer in the art of scratching.

Actually, in business it's perfectly legitimate to use the ideas you've scratched for without worrying about transforming them into something new. A talent agent I know was meeting with an opera singer to discuss ways to enlarge her career and broaden her appeal to the popular market. The diva mentioned that she would like to see some of the famous arias she'd recorded appear in films and on movie soundtracks, so millions of people would be exposed to her voice. A worthy objective. The executive had an idea for her: He showed her how the songwriter Burt Bacharach had produced a 4-CD limited edition of all the different singers who have recorded his hits over the years. He stamped out one thousand copies of this private anthology and sent them to music executives and producers around the world. Bacharach's objective was to get producers thinking of him when they were looking for tunes for their recording artists and

soundtracks. The agent suggested the same for the diva: print up a private anthology of her best arias for the wider music community beyond the opera world. The agent was quite pleased with himself when he told me this useful idea. To my eye, he had taken A (Bacharach's idea) and B (the diva's desire to broaden her market) and come up with A (do the same as Bacharach). It was smart and practical, and it was probably the right answer. He'd done his homework. He hadn't done anything particularly creative, but then that wasn't his goal.

Now, don't get me wrong. I'm not knocking this sort of connective thinking in business. It's smart and practical. Use what worked before and adapt it to your situation. With profits, paychecks, and promotions at stake, it's only natural to try to reduce the risk by relying on what's already worked. We've all been in meetings to deal with a problem. Everyone is stumped until someone remembers how another group solved the same problem. Everyone nods with relief. "Great idea," says the boss. "Let's do that." And moves on. That's legitimate connective thinking in business.

But an artist cannot do that. People don't want to see you copying someone else (in fact, if you do, they take special delight in figuring out who or what you have copied). Art is not about minimizing risk and delivering work that is guaranteed to please. Artists have bigger goals. If being an artist means pushing the envelope, you don't want to stuff your material in someone else's envelope. You don't want to know the envelope has been invented. You want to find that out on your own.

Scratching is a wildly unruly process. But a few rules can make it a bit more manageable.

## Be in Shape.

Scratching takes longer when you're rusty. Just as an athlete performs better if he's in top shape, ideas will come to you more quickly if you've been putting in the time at your chosen craft. If it's my first day back after a long layoff, I'm prepared to write off a whole week of work; I know much of it will be worthless, but I

have to go through that process to get my mind and body back into shape. When my conditioning is right, I can feel productive in two or three minutes. You may already know this. Whatever your medium, if you've been away from it for a few weeks, the first days are going to be clumsy and fruitless. But things get easier as the rust falls away. The ideas come more smoothly. The hands on the instrument, the fingers at the keyboard, the eye at the easel respond in sync to the urgings of your mind and heart. You are fit and gleaming. You can't wait to attack your work.

### Scratch in the Best Places.

When I'm searching for music for a dance, I go immediately to the best composers: Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, Haydn. I listen to all their music because I want to educate my ear and, more important, I want to find their best music. You only go around once in this life, so I'm not interested in creating dances to their minor works.

I'm ruthless about this. I look at scratching in the best places as if I were working at a tailor's table. You've got the bolt of fabric, the tracing paper patterns, the pins to attach the pattern to the fabric, the scissors to cut the fabric, and the thread to stitch it all together. But the key is the fabric. The better the fabric, the more likely you will do your best work. That's why finding a great piece of music is key to making a great dance. The better the music, the better the dance. My objective is not to screw it up.

Sculptors know that half their job is selecting the best stone to work with. It's all in the material. If they get the best material, they are over the hump. Directors say the same thing about casting: If you've got the best people, it's hard to go wrong. That's the way I feel about scratching among the masters. It makes it so much easier to get home.

You should do the same. If you read for inspiration, read the top-drawer writers, and read their masterworks first. If you get your inspiration from art, look at the masters. If it's movies, focus on directors in the pantheon of greats. Scratch among the best and you will automatically raise the quality of ideas you uncover.

### Never Scratch the Same Place Twice.

An integral part of Ulysses S. Grant's battle strategy was to never go back over the same terrain—you might meet the enemy pursuing you. More important, you gain no new information if you retrace your steps over already familiar land. Grant was always scouting new routes over new ground. That works for me, too, with scratching. I improvise in new rooms, turn on different music, change my reading habits, all in an effort to fight off old habits and shake myself up. If you scratch the same way all the time, you'll end up in the same place with the same old ideas.

### Maintain the White Hot Pitch.

You've been there when a boss throws a temper tantrum in a meeting. Everyone in the room goes "Uh oh! The boss is mad. We better shape up." The tantrum, judiciously applied, is a great wake-up call to get people to do something. It's the same for you when you're alone and scratching for an idea. Throw a tantrum at yourself. Anger is a cheap adrenaline rush, but when you're going nowhere and can't get started, it will do.

Scratching is not about control and repose. It's about unleashing furious mindless energy and watching it bounce off everything in your path. The hope is that a spark will fly from all that contact and combustion—and it usually does.

I liken this mindless high-energy state to lifting deadweight off the ground. There is a moment when you've bent your knees, grabbed the bar, and are about to neutralize the massive gravity of this object. At that moment your mind is blank. You are all impulse and intention. You cannot think about the weight. You just have to lift it.

It's the same with scratching. When you're scratching for an idea, you don't need to think ahead. You have to trust the unconscious rush and let it hurtle forward unedited and unencumbered. Let it be awful and awkward and wrong. You can fix the results later, but you won't generate the ideas at all if you cool down the white hot pitch.

Scratching is where creativity begins. It is the moment where your ideas first take flight and begin to defy gravity. If you try to rein it in, you'll never know how high you can go.

Chapter 7

accidents will happen

The most productive artists I know have a plan in mind when they get down to work. They know what they want to accomplish, how to do it, and what to do if the process falls off track.

But there's a fine line between good planning and overplanning. You never want the planning to inhibit the natural evolution of your work.

The photographer Richard Avedon is as good at planning and preparation as anyone I know. Before he takes a portrait of a subject, he knows exactly what kind of camera, film, props, and background he will use. Everything is

planned ahead. None of his technique is left to chance. Unlike many portrait photographers, Avedon takes preparation a step further and insists on meeting the subjects before the photo session. But all that planning ends at the moment the subject walks into the studio; that's when instinct and creativity take over. Avedon doesn't have a preconceived notion of what he wants the photo to look like, though he does know what feeling it should convey. He plans ahead, but not too far ahead, so he can recognize *amazing* when he sees it. When he photographed Charlie Chaplin, it was the very day the great comedian was leaving America. He was annoyed and it showed. He stubbornly refused to give Avedon any emotion other than a blank stare. But then there was a split-second moment when Chaplin's theatrical instincts slipped through. Chaplin pointed his index fingers above his head, creating horns, and, with his scowl, became an angry devil. Avedon believed that a portrait of Chaplin had to have the feel of humor. Equally stubborn and determined, he worked on breaking Chaplin's sullen mood. When Chaplin let his guard down, pretending to be a laughing devil with horns, Avedon snapped. End of photo session. He got what he wanted.

A plan is like the scaffolding around a building. When you're putting up the exterior shell, the scaffolding is vital. But once the shell is in place and you start work on the interior, the scaffolding disappears. That's how I think of planning. It has to be sufficiently thoughtful and solid to get the work up and standing straight, but it cannot take over as you toil away on the interior guts of a piece. Transforming your ideas rarely goes according to plan.

This, to me, is the most interesting paradox of creativity: In order to be habitually creative, you have to know how to prepare to be creative, but good planning alone won't make your efforts successful; it's only after you let go of your plans that you can breathe life into your efforts.

When I was making *Surfer at the River Styx*, I had trouble coming up with an ending. I was yearning for something majestic and I wasn't getting it. Then, one day in rehearsal, I saw it. I wanted all four men in the company on

stage near the end of the ballet, and I had them partnering one of the women. Four men, one woman. This is not usually done. Perhaps something unusual can happen with that combination. They were holding her low off the ground, and as she was circling around their arms and bodies in a very risky form of aerial partnering, I could see her gradually but organically snaking her way up their bodies. She just kept evolving and moving higher as the group of four men walked slowly toward the right side of the stage. And then it hit me: Omigod, what if they lifted her as high as possible, holding her legs in a perfect split? Lit properly (that is, theatrically), she'd be floating in air. That's the ending!

It was a stroke of luck, but I was prepared to accept it for the simple reason that I needed an ending. At that moment I felt blessed, because it sent the piece into a sphere where the entire dance was suddenly coherent. I certainly hadn't planned it. It was a gift. But I also felt I'd earned it.

Your creative endeavors can never be thoroughly mapped out ahead of time. You have to allow for the suddenly altered landscape, the change in plan, the accidental spark—and you have to see it as a stroke of luck rather than a disturbance of your perfect scheme. Habitually creative people are, in E. B. White's phrase, "prepared to be lucky."

The key words here are "prepared" and "lucky." They're inseparable. You don't get lucky without preparation, and there's no sense in being prepared if you're not open to the possibility of a glorious accident. The sports entrepreneur Mark McCormack, whose career began with three enormous consecutive strokes of luck—golf legends Arnold Palmer, Gary Player, and Jack Nicklaus were his first three clients—once said, "Yes, I admit I was lucky. But I saw it and I was ready for it, whereas many people wouldn't know a stroke of luck if it bit them on the nose."

Some people resent the idea of luck. Accepting the role of chance in our lives suggests that our creations and triumphs are not entirely our own, and that in some way we're undeserving of our success. I say, Get over it. This is how the world works. In creative endeavors **luck is a skill.**

The discovery of vulcanized rubber is the perfect example of the power of luck. Charles Goodyear, after years of experimentation, walks into a general store in 1839, accidentally spills his concoction of gum and sulphur onto a sizzling potbelly stove, and discovers that instead of melting like molasses the compound chars like leather, leaving a dry, springy material that keeps its flexibility at almost any temperature. Goodyear called the process "vulcanization" and almost every use of rubber depends on it. It is one of the most celebrated "accidents" in industrial science. Goodyear, of course, didn't see it that way, and I side with Goodyear. He was active in his pursuit of a durable rubber, not passive; he was always experimenting and therefore always open to luck. Also, while the accident could have happened to anybody at any time, it took a person with an open mind to recognize the importance of what took place on that stove, and it took knowledge and skill to analyze it and repeat it in the laboratory. The hot stove incident held meaning, said Goodyear, only for the person "whose mind was prepared to draw an inference," the one who had "applied himself most perseveringly to the subject." (Gary Player put this principle succinctly: "The more I practice, the luckier I get.")

Being prepared for luck is like getting a voice message that tells you, "Something good may happen to you between 9:00 A.M. and 5:00 P.M. today. Make sure you're at your desk (or in your studio or office or at your laboratory bench) working. And keep your eyes open for it."

Of course, you have to be present, in the room, to recognize the stroke of luck. Being in the room is a concomitant of Goodyear's perseverance: The more you are in the room working, experimenting, banging away at your objective, the more luck has a chance of biting you on the nose.

Woody Allen said that eighty percent of success in show business is showing up. It's the same with luck: eighty percent of it is showing up to see it. My dancers can be doing the most marvelous things in the studio, but if I'm not there to witness it, it may as well be the proverbial tree falling in the forest. Never happened.

Advertising wizard Phil Dusenberry established his career as a creative di-



rector by landing the General Electric account. GE was looking to consolidate all its advertising at one shop and they wanted a corporate slogan that unified the message. On the day before his presentation to the GE executives, Dusenberry didn't feel the slogan was quite right. He had the concept—"We make the things that make life good . . ." or something like that—but he didn't feel it gelled. So he laid out the various slogans and started rearranging the words, in much the same fashion as I play with my coins. Eventually the words fell into place and spelled out "We bring good things to life." Dusenberry knew this was the winner the moment he saw it. Was this luck or accident? Would anyone else have recognized the perfect slogan? Would anyone else have bothered to play with the words? Dusenberry was prepared, he was persevering in the room, and he was able to see it.

It's tempting to try to rein in the unruliness of the creative process, especially at the start. Planning lets you impose order on the chaotic process of making something new, but when it's taken too far you get locked into a status quo, and creative thinking is about breaking free from the status quo, even from one you made yourself. That's why it's vital to know the difference between good planning and too much planning.

Over the years I've learned a thing or two—entirely the hard way—about the pitfalls of locking yourself into a predetermined course. I started out in the not-for-profit world of dance, where much of my sustenance came from foundation grants. I became adept at writing grant applications that required me to specify exactly what I intended to do with the grant money—from the music I would commission or license to whom I'd hire to design the costumes. No detail was left to chance. As a result, I fell into the habit of overplanning. Since I like to keep my promises, I developed a stoic reluctance to change. My focus on preparation and ritual made it difficult for me to veer away from my plan.

But working in real time in the real world eventually showed me the error of my ways. I began to see that overplanning can be as pernicious as not planning at all. There's an emotional lie to overplanning; it creates a security blanket

that lets you assume you have things under control, that you are further along than you really are, that you're home free when you haven't even walked out the door yet.

When I was first considering writing this book, I thought about calling it *How Not to Plan*. That title appealed to the contrarian in me. I wanted people to take note that planning isn't everything, that being too organized can be a negative. It hems you into a corner, handcuffs you, and as a result, shortchanges your opportunities to be lucky. To embrace luck, you have to enhance your tolerance for ambiguity. *Plan only to a point*. The great military strategists from Sun-tzu to Clausewitz have advised that you can plan only so far into the battle; you have to save lots of room for your adversary's contribution.

Let's take a look at some of the problems that can derail your well-laid plans.

## Other People.

When I prepare to work on a project, the field general in me comes out immediately. I marshal all my forces. I carefully assemble my team, from dancers to technical support. Anything less would be underplanning.

But people sometimes let you down. For every person who inspires you and pushes you in the right direction, there is often another who is "missing in action," either because he's unreliable or simply closes you off rather than opens you up. No matter how well-intentioned someone else may be, things go wrong—dancers get injured, a loved one is taken ill, someone hits a creative roadblock just as you're breaking through your own—and you have to be able to roll with the changes and work with them instead of resisting. The peg may have started out round but it's square now; hammering harder isn't going to make it fit.

Relying too much on others, even in an inevitably collaborative process, makes you lazy. Don't get me wrong, I love the people I work with. Unlike the solitary painter or writer, I do nothing but collaborations; it's not me up there on-stage dancing anymore. The dancers are my collaborators, as are the composer,

the musicians, and the costume, set, and lighting designers. There is no one in the world more delighted than I when my production wizard Santo Loquasto, with whom I have worked for decades, strolls in with a set design that blows everyone away. But I can't ever let myself think, "Well, this section of the ballet is subpar. Thank God Santo's set design will save me here."

To protect himself against depending too much on movie stars, the film director Milos Forman has a style that keeps many actors on edge. He won't show them the script too far in advance. He won't rehearse them. He won't permit them to launch into their arias. He just starts the cameras rolling and tells them to say their lines. Actors hate that; they feel unprepared, under someone else's control. Which they are. It's the director's duty to let nothing interfere with the telling of the story, and in Forman's view that includes the actors. He is the one with responsibility for the Big Picture, a perspective he has to maintain at all times no matter what the priorities might be for the performer on that day's set. (On the other hand, they have to admit it works: three actors have won Academy Awards in his films. Forman's efforts make his actors lucky.)

### Perfectionism at the Start.

Another trap is the belief that everything has to be perfect before you can take the next step. You won't move on to that second chapter until the first is written, rewritten, honed, tweaked, examined under a microscope, and buffed to a bright mahogany sheen. You won't dip a brush in the paint until you've assembled all the colors you can possibly imagine using in the course of the project. I know it's important to be prepared, but at the start of the process this type of perfectionism is more like procrastination. You've got to get in there and *do*.

I used to bask in the notion that all my obstacles to creative efficiency would vanish if I only had exactly the right resources: my own studio, my own dancers, my own theater, and enough money to pay the dancers all year long and to hire the best collaborators. But I've learned that the opposite is true: Limits are a se-

cret blessing, and bounty can be a curse. I've been on enough big-budget film sets to appreciate the malignant influence of abundance and bloat.

A good manager in business knows that there's never a moment in the business cycle when a company's objectives and resources are in perfect harmony. There's never an ideal balance between how many orders you have and how much inventory you're stocking. Your expenses and your income are never exactly in sync; one is always outpacing the other. Your people always demand more money, more resources, more investment spending than you're willing to give; you always have more phone calls to return or paperwork to handle than time to get it all done. Good managers know this instinctively, so they never plan on an ideal harmony they can't achieve. It's better to be ready to go than to wait until you are perfectly ready.

For my first dance, the seven-minute-long *Tank Dive* performed in Room 1604 at Hunter College in New York City in 1965, I had no money, no scenery, no music, no stage to speak of. How limited is that? In fact, for my first five years I choreographed to silence. And yet those impoverished circumstances forced me to discover my own dance vocabulary. Dizzy Gillespie once said of Louis Armstrong's giant influence on jazz, "No him, no me." I feel the same way about my years of extremely limited resources: No deprivation, no inspiration. No then, no now.

Even George Balanchine, who created a blissful cocoon of nearly unlimited resources at New York City Ballet, liked to feel that he worked under restrictions. When someone asked him how he made dances, he replied, "On union time." Meaning, he could only create when he had the dancers in the room, and the dancers were in the room for only fifty-five minutes at a time, between their union-mandated hourly five-minute breaks. Balanchine had everything a choreographer needed—his own company, his own theater, his own orchestra (!), his own deep-pocketed patrons—yet even he had limits imposed: He operated at the mercy of AGMA, the dancers' union. Based on the evidence, he obviously made it work.

Remember this the next time you moan about the hand you're dealt: No matter how limited your resources, they're enough to get you started. Time, for example, is our most limited resource, but it is not the enemy of creativity that we think it is. The ticking clock is our friend if it gets us moving with urgency and passion. Give me a writer who thinks he has all the time in the world and I'll show you a writer who never delivers. Likewise with money, which comes a close second as our most limited resource. It's tempting to believe that the quantity and quality of our creative productivity would increase exponentially if only we could afford everything we've imagined, but I've seen too many artists dry up the moment they had enough money in the bank. For every artist who is empowered and inspired by money, there is another who gets lazy and self-satisfied because of it. Necessity will continue to be the mother of invention.

## The Wrong Structure.

Creating is all about playing and innovating within familiar forms. It's natural to want to establish as many ground rules as possible about form before we get down to work, but you have to choose the form that's not only appropriate to you but right for your particular idea.

The novel that seems to be going nowhere might be better as a short story; conversely, the story whose characters are bursting with unfulfilled promise should grow into a novella. The screenplay whose dialogue crackles but lacks a strong visual component could make a great one-act play. The portrait whose lines fascinate but in which color is a distraction might have a sculpture inside it dying to come out.

Poets face this all the time because of the multitude of forms. Free verse liberates, but haiku concentrates. Poems come in many forms, from sonnets to villanelles to pantoums and sestinas. Some forms confine the poet, others make him or her sing.

The sestina, for example, is a puzzling form, handed down from the twelfth-century French troubadour Arnaut Daniel. It consists of thirty-nine lines—six stanzas of six lines each with an envoi of three lines at the end. It does not

rhyme. Instead, the lines must end with just six different words throughout, and there is a prescribed pattern for these repetitions: The word that appears at the end of a stanza must end the first line of the next stanza, and the end-word of the first line of each stanza moves to the second line of the next stanza. It's amazing that such a goofily willful form survives, but some contemporary poets are intrigued by all that self-guiding structure. W. H. Auden tried his hand at one sestina; it's called "*Paysage Moralisé*," and you can find it in his *Collected Poems*. It acquires a certain power through its numbing repetitions, but it strikes me as more of a parlor trick than a deeply felt poem.

The sonnet has a very clear structure requiring fourteen lines of iambic pentameter with a defined rhyme scheme, but it is still flexible enough to breathe. You can select from the three major rhyme schemes: Italian, Spenserian, and Shakespearean. Unlike the testy sestina, the sonnet's length and rhymes make it pleasing to the ear, and provide room for linguistic and thematic invention. You need look no further than Shakespeare's 154 sonnets for proof of the beauty and range possible within the confines of the sonnet. The difference between the sonnet and the sestina is the difference between going fishing with a fishing net or in a diving bell: Both devices are built for the water, but the diving bell is hard, inviolate, confining, and inviting only to extremely curious fish; the net is flexible, porous, and expansive—perfectly designed to haul 'em in.

## A Sense of Obligation.

I once spent six weeks rehearsing sixteen dancers on a bad piece of music called "The Hollywood Kiss" because I felt obligated to a composer who had done a favor for me. I had a company of dancers on full payroll, so I was obliged to keep them busy. I was obligated to the studio I had rented out and the staff I had hired. But obligation, I eventually saw, is not the same as commitment, and it's certainly not an acceptable reason to stick with something that isn't working. So, after six weeks of going nowhere with the meter running, I scuttled the project. Despite the most meticulous planning—or more likely because of it—I

wasted six weeks of everyone's time. In hindsight, I should have heeded the CEO who told me, "You only need one good reason to commit to an idea, not four hundred. But if you have four hundred reasons to say yes and one reason to say no, the answer is probably no."

Whatever your reasons for starting with a project—whether crass or noble—they have to be clear and unencumbered. Obligation is a flimsy base for creativity, way down the list behind passion, courage, instinct, and the desire to do something great.

### The Wrong Materials.

Another error of planning is to pursue a goal with the wrong materials. I used to be guilty of this. I'd be hell-bent on making a quartet, and only three dancers would show up at rehearsal that day. I would fume to myself, "It's not fair!" I was so locked into my plan for four dancers that I'd be totally unprepared to work with three. An entire day would be lost. Eventually I wised up and saw the flaw in any method of working that doesn't accommodate the notion of injury to dancers. Injuries are part of the business. It's like a wedding planner not taking into consideration the possibility that an outdoor wedding reception might be sabotaged by rain. Solution: You put up a tent!

It took me a while to accept this. I tend toward optimism and ignore Murphy's Law ("Anything that can go wrong will") at every turn. But I learned to adapt and to plan differently. If you're fixated on making a quartet, I told myself, you'd better have four dancers and at least two understudies, because somebody will get injured and disappear for a spell, or else you shouldn't be making quartets.

These mistakes—relying too much on others, waiting for the perfect setup, overthinking structure, feeling obligated to finish what you've started, and working with the wrong materials—are deadly. Any one of them will undermine your best efforts.

Incredibly, in what I like to think of as my sage years when I should have known better, I made all of these mistakes at once. It was in 1999, when the New York City Ballet, home of the Balanchine tradition, invited me to make a dance for the company.

I should have been on red alert the moment Peter Martins, the artistic director, generously put the entire company at my disposal. "It's all yours for the next four weeks," he said. "You can have any dancer you want. All the rehearsal time you need. Whatever musicians you want."

Whom the gods wish to destroy, they give unlimited resources.

With the extraordinary dancers of the City Ballet available to me, I turned to a musical selection I'd always loved, a late Beethoven piano sonata, #31 in A flat major, Op. 110. This might not have been my best impulse. After all, I had an entire world-class orchestra at my disposal, willing and able to play anything in the vast Western repertory. Instead, I said, "No thank you, I don't want an orchestra; I'll take one lonely piano player." Traditionally, City Ballet's dancers have "quiet feet"—that is, they don't make a lot of noise on the stage floor during a performance. This is very difficult to achieve, but it's characteristic of City Ballet training that their ballerinas practically float above the floor. I thought this would allow the sound of the solo piano to come through despite my desire to use a large complement of fourteen dancers. I had learned earlier from another Beethoven piano solo ballet that if you're using a great piece of music, the audience wants to hear it.

What makes NYCB special is not that it has some of the best dancers in the world, but that it has so many of them. I was like a kid in a toy store. I wanted to get every dancer I'd admired at NYCB into my ballet. I pushed some very accomplished soloists to dance in ensembles, which they considered demeaning. They all wanted to be featured, but I had a large cast and not everyone could get a satisfying star turn. Too many dancers, not enough notes. I would have been better off choreographing a duet.

Worse, the sound generated by so many feet, however well tempered, overwhelmed the music. As rehearsals progressed, I found myself asking them to be more and more quiet, to the point where it got to be a running joke. At night I had dreams of Balanchine up in heaven, chuckling down at me. "You silly woman," he said. "You're using Beethoven? I never used Beethoven. I was too smart to use Beethoven. He's too good and very tough to dance to. And why are you only using a piano? How many times have I told you, 'Use the damn orchestra!?' The audience has paid for it. They want to hear it. And it will make everything else bigger."

So two weeks into my four weeks of rehearsals it was out with the piano sonata and in with a really loud symphony that wouldn't be drowned out by dancing feet—in this case, Beethoven's jaunty, percussive Symphony #7.

Now I had to graft two weeks of choreography made to an intimate piano sonata onto that boisterous symphony. I could see that it wasn't working very well. Here is where the sense of obligation kicked in: I couldn't just throw out all the work we had done, because that would mean erasing two weeks of the entire company's time, which is worth a fortune. I felt obliged to the people providing me with these remarkable resources not to have wasted them.

I worked all night to make the changes fit the dancers, but then I ran into the human equation: While building a lot of the ballet on the wrong piece of music, I used up a big portion of the dancers' enthusiasm. Getting them re-excited mid-stream about a new piece of music created something of a credibility gap.

Moreover, I'd had to learn how the company functioned along the way. This was my first foray into the company on my own (I had co-choreographed *Brahms/Handel* with Jerome Robbins a decade earlier), and it slowly dawned on me that I was in the dark about a lot of things I normally take for granted. I didn't know how rehearsals were scheduled. I didn't know how the dancers behaved; they were in the midst of a season, rehearsing during the day while performing at night, and I didn't know their tolerance for new work or how much they would commit to such a project. I had to find that out as we went, and this added one more area of uncertainty and stress into the equation.

If that wasn't bad enough, I was mildly annoyed with the business deal that had brought me into City Ballet. Choreographers get a fee for their work, and I have worked long and hard to get one of the highest fees in the world. City Ballet doesn't play that way. Every choreographer gets the same fee, no matter who they are. It's called a Most Favored Nations clause. No one gets treated any better than anyone else, or any worse. I agreed to the deal but it must have bothered me subconsciously because my son, Jesse, picked up on it.

"Remind me, Jesse," I would ask him. "Why am I working so hard for so little money?"

"This is New York City Ballet," he would reply. "You're paying for the opportunity to hit a home run out of Yankee Stadium."

And I would go, "Yes, that's what I'm doing. I'm going to hit a home run out of Yankee Stadium."

That swing-for-the-fences mentality may be the most dangerous mistake I made. Everything I did was predicated on being bigger, bolder, grander. I was going to make a statement. I was going to change the company. All in one dance. At one point, in a display of hubris that makes me roar with laughter now, I actually asked the company to fly in the great Austrian conductor Carlos Kleiber (whose recording of Beethoven's Seventh I admired greatly) to conduct the premiere. And NYCB was so willing to cater to my whims (again, those unlimited resources!), they actually made some inquiries with the famously elusive conductor.

I could go on citing the petty misjudgments I made during this project, but you get the idea. When the ballet, called *The Beethoven Seventh*, premiered in January 2000, the response from audience and critics was respectful and in some cases quite warm. But it's not my favorite work or my best work, and I'll never be able to think about it without remembering the pains of the process. Considering that I went into the project hoping to make my mark in the annals of this historic company, I would have to say that I came up far short of my ambitions. This story could be taught at Harvard Business School as a case study: An executive gets a promotion to run a major division in a corporation, the company

gives him a blank check to shake things up, and the new boss responds by (a) announcing unrealistic goals, (b) tackling the wrong problem out of the gate, (c) enlisting all the talented people he can find but assigning tasks that are not quite right for the people doing them, (d) changing his mind midstream, and (e) assuming he knows the only way to do things. A perfect plan for disaster.

Six weeks later I was across the Lincoln Center plaza at American Ballet Theatre to make a new ballet, my fifteenth for the company. The circumstances were ideally horrible. It was as if ABT management had decided to give me the opposite of City Ballet's *carte blanche*. ABT was giving me two weeks to mount a ballet from start to finish—an almost impossible schedule. The budget was minimal. Other than the two weeks, I had no fixed rehearsal times. If I wanted to use any of the principal dancers I would have to catch them on the run between other rehearsals and performances. The whole ballet would have to be spaced on stage, properly lit, and costumed in ninety minutes of technical rehearsal the afternoon of the world premiere. That day would also be the first time we would work with a live orchestra. Talk about limited resources!

In hindsight, it was an ideal situation for me. With a constricted timetable, bare-bones budget, and dancers I couldn't count on to be at my beck and call, I responded accordingly. The circumstances demanded total self-reliance and exquisite planning.

The process that resulted in the ballet *The Brahms-Haydn Variations* was, to my mind, a model of proper planning. After my recent City Ballet experience, I had no delusions of grandeur. I also knew my materials well, the dancers I would be using, and how much time I would have to rehearse. I made a virtue of the clock ticking (you can't overthink when you don't have time to think at all). I consider this piece the most satisfying ballet of my career.

The conditions were so limited that, as Samuel Johnson said about the prospect of being hanged, they concentrated the mind wonderfully.

an “A” in failure

Chapter 11

A math professor at Williams College bases ten percent of his students' grades on failure. Mathematics is all about trying out new ideas—new formulas, theorems, approaches—and knowing that the vast majority of them will be dead ends. To encourage his students not to be afraid of testing their quirkiest ideas in public, he rewards rather than punishes them for coming up with wrong answers.

Every creative person has to learn to deal with failure, because failure, like death and taxes, is inescapable. If Leonardo and Beethoven and Goethe failed on occasion, what makes you think you'll be the exception?

I don't mean to romanticize failure, to parrot the cliché "If you're not failing, you're not taking enough risks," especially if that view "liberates" you to fail too often. Believe me, success is preferable to failure. But there is a therapeutic power to failure. It cleanses. It helps you put aside who you aren't and reminds you who you are. Failure humbles.

The best failures are the private ones you commit in the confines of your room, alone, with no strangers watching. Private failures are great. I encourage you to fail as much as you want in private. It will cost you a little in terms of efficiency—the more you fail, the longer it takes to finish—but no one has to see this. Private failures are the first drafts that get tossed in the wastebasket, the sketches crumpled up on the floor, the manuscripts that stay in the drawer. They are the not-so-good ideas you reject en route to finding the one that clicks.

When I tape a three-hour improvisational session with a dancer and find only thirty seconds of useful material in the tape, I am earning straight A's in failure. Do the math: I have rejected 99.7 percent of my work that day. It would be like a writer knocking out a two-thousand-word chapter and upon re-reading deciding that only three words were worth keeping. Painful, yes, but for me absolutely necessary.

What's so wonderful about wasting that kind of time? It's simple: The more you fail in private, the less you will fail in public. In many ways, the creative act is editing. You're editing out all the lame ideas that won't resonate with the public. It's not pandering. It's exercising your judgment. It's setting the bar a little higher for yourself, and therefore your audience.

If you forget this—if you let down your guard, or lower your standards, or compromise too quickly, or leave in something that should be rejected—you'll have to deal with the other, more painful kind of failure, the public kind.

Some of my favorite dancers at New York City Ballet were the ones who fell the most. I always loved watching Mimi Paul; she took big risks onstage and went down often. Her falls reminded you that the dancers were doing super-human things onstage, and when she fell, I would realize, "Damn, she's human." And hitting the ground seemed to transform Mimi: It was as though the stage ab-



sorbed the energy of her fall and injected it back into her with an extra dose of fearlessness. Mimi would bounce back up, ignore the fall, and right before my eyes would become superhuman again. I thought, "Go Mimi!" She became greater because she had fallen. Failure enlarged her dancing.

That should be your model for dealing with failure.

When you fail in public, you are forcing yourself to learn a whole new set of skills, skills that have nothing to do with creating and everything to do with surviving.

Jerome Robbins liked to say that you do your best work after your biggest disasters. For one thing, it's so painful it almost guarantees that you won't make those mistakes again. Also, you have nothing to lose; you've hit bottom, and the only place to go is up. A fiasco compels you to change dramatically. The golfer Bobby Jones said, "I never learned anything from a match I won." He respected defeat and he profited from it.

Failure creates an interesting tug of war between forgetting and remembering. It's vital to be able to forget the pain of failure while retaining the lessons from it. I've always found it easier to put something that wasn't very successful behind me than to move on to something new after an effort that was acclaimed. After a certifiable success, I always think, "I could lose this," and so I cling to it. (For this reason, Duke University basketball coach Mike Krzyzewski banned his teams from calling themselves the "defending national champions," because he felt this made them think defensively. Also, he argued that you only defend something that can be taken away from you, and your past successes will always be yours no matter what.) A part of me hates to let go of success and move on. After a certifiable failure, however, I can't wait to move on. I'm thinking, "Get back to work. Fix it. Do it different and better the next time."

That's the tug of war. You have to forget the failure to get it behind you, but at the same time you have to remember the reasons for it. People accommodate this duality in their own ways. I know one writer who frames all his rejection let-

ters and hangs them up in the guest bathroom for every visitor to see. He scoffs at failure. I know an actress who does the same with her most vicious reviews, mocking those who mock her. That which to anyone else is a loss is to the artist a gain.

My heroes in *The Odyssey* are the older warriors who have been through many wars. They don't hide their scars, they wear them proudly as a kind of armor. When you fail—whether your short film induces yawns or your photographs inspire people to say "That's nice" (ouch!) or your novel is trashed in a journal of opinion that matters to you—the best thing to do is acknowledge your battle scars and gird yourself for the next round. Tell yourself, "This is a deep wound. But it's going to heal and I will remember this wound. When I go back into the fray it will serve me well."

To get the full benefit of failure you have to understand the reasons for it.

First, there's a failure of **skill**. You have an idea in mind but not the requisite skills to pull it off. This is the cruelest, crudest, most predictable form of failure. Your reach exceeds your grasp. In my case, it might involve having an insufficient vocabulary of movement, or not recognizing how the audience will read a particular gesture or move. It's no different for a composer trying to write a fugue without skill in counterpoint, or a writer constructing dialogue with a tin ear for how his characters speak. There's only one solution to this type of failure: *Get to work*. Develop the skills you need.

Then there's a failure of **concept**. You have a weak idea that doesn't hold up under your daily ministrations. You torment the idea, and instead of growing it shrivels up. It could be a bad story idea, bad subject matter, bad casting, bad partners, bad timing. You scramble in the beginning to mask this fundamental error, hoping that maybe through guile and trickery you can redeem the work. But it catches up with you. Sows' ears tend to remain sows' ears. Get out while the getting's good.

A third kind of failure is one of **judgment**. You leave something in the piece that should have been discarded, left on the cutting room floor. Perhaps you let your guard down for a moment and suspended your usual good judgment. Maybe you let someone else's judgment substitute for yours. Maybe you didn't want to hurt somebody's feelings. The only way to avoid this mistake is to remember at all times that you're the one who'll be judged by the final product. The actor whose scene you want to cut isn't responsible for the whole film; you are. The friend who tells you she likes the five-page description of a squirrel in the park doesn't have her name on the book jacket; you do. It's a hard mistake to avoid when you're starting out, but the sooner you demonstrate good judgment, the sooner people will give you the clout to exercise it.

I don't mess up this way anymore; I'm willing to be regarded as a tyrant to keep my vision intact. I've auditioned 900 dancers in order to hire 4 of them. It takes a certain steeliness of character and an intense dislike of failure to tell 896 people that they are somehow lacking in your eyes. But I don't care if I torture casting agents and scouts and staff; if they send me 100 consecutive dancers who almost intrigue me, but not quite, I'll tell them, "Get me more. Get me different." I'll say I'm sorry for being so ornery, but I'm not really apologizing. Neither should you when it's your judgment on the line.

The worst is failure of **nerve**. You have everything going for you except the guts to support your idea and explore the concept fully. The corrosive thought that you will look foolish holds you back from telling the truth. I wish I had a cure for this. All I have is the certainty of experience that looking foolish is good for you. It nourishes the spirit. You appreciate this more and more over the years as the need to not look foolish fades with youth. (Remember the centenarian who when asked about the best part of living such a long life replied, "No more peer pressure.")

There's failure through **repetition**. As a choreographer, I'm constantly forced

to revisit my past. Repertory is the bread and butter of a choreographer. You have to repeat yourself to make a living. Painters don't have to get up in the morning and repaint *Starry Night* on commission in order to afford a new canvas; Saul Bellow doesn't have to retype *Henderson the Rain King* in order to get people to read his latest book. But choreographers create a dance, teach it to dancers in rehearsal, watch it being performed, and if it's a success, get to teach it to new dancers so it can be performed again and again and again. It's wonderful that audiences love my old works and want to keep seeing them, but after a while I feel like Bruce Springsteen must when his fans demand to hear "Born to Run" at every concert.

Repetition is a problem if it forces us to cling to our past successes. Constant reminders of the things that worked inhibit us from trying something bold and new. We lose sight of the fact that we weren't searching for a formula when we first did something great; we were in unexplored territory, following our instincts and passions wherever they might lead us. It's only when we look back that we see a path, and it's only there because we blazed it.

After his success with Mickey Mouse, Walt Disney's next huge hit was the cartoon short of "The Three Little Pigs," which became a national phenomenon in 1933. It was billed above the main feature on most theater marquees. Its hit song, "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?," became a Depression-era anthem.

Disney's film distributor, United Artists, urged him to cash in on the success of "The Three Little Pigs" with other pig-related cartoons. He resisted at first but was finally persuaded by his brother Roy. None of the three follow-ups—"The Big Bad Wolf," "Three Little Wolves," and "The Practical Pig"—succeeded like the original, leading Walt Disney to conclude, "You can't top pigs with pigs." Once Disney realized that you cannot repeat your successes in the entertainment business, he was free to push the envelope with his first full-length animated feature, the classic *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.

Finally, and most profoundly, there is failure that comes from **denial**. Creating anything new and fresh is a brazen, presumptuous act. You're assuming that

the world cares about what you have to say. You can't afford to be paralyzed by the familiar fears of: What if no one shows up? What if no one likes it? What if I don't measure up? What if they laugh? So you become adept at slipping into denial mode. Anything less and you might never get out of bed in the morning.

But the same mechanism that protects you from your worst fears can blind you to reality. Denial becomes a liability when you see that something is not working and you refuse to deal with it. You tell yourself "I'll fix it later," or you convince yourself that you can get away with it, that your audience won't notice the weak spots. This is bad denial. You won't get very far relying on your audience's ignorance.

Change—changing the work and how we work—is the unpleasant task of *dealing* with that which we have been *denying*. It is probably the biggest test in the creative process, demanding not only an admission that you've made a mistake but that you know how to fix it. It requires you to challenge a status quo of your own making.

The process that led *Movin' Out* to its Broadway success demonstrates so many different types of failure and correction that it's a perfect case study in the art of change. Let's take a look at how many things can go wrong even when you know the pitfalls going in, and how to turn around something as unwieldy as a multimillion-dollar theatrical enterprise.

I've already explained how I conceived the idea of a dance show set to the songs of Billy Joel, and the research and preparation that went into its creation. But that is just a small part of the story.

Mounting an expensive Broadway musical is usually an obstacle course of blind alleys, logjams, and political intrigues. Miraculously, we avoided all that up front. I had the idea, I secured Billy's blessing, and I quickly found enough seed money from a major Broadway producer to hire dancers and a band. A few months later, in October 2001, on a spacious midtown Manhattan soundstage, I unveiled a stripped-down version of the show for Billy, the producers, would-be investors, and friends. No costumes, no set, no lights, not even a name for the show (it was referred to as The Thael Project); just sixteen dancers and ten mu-

sicians performing on a bare studio floor. The audience loved it, and within hours the show was fully invested with an \$8.5 million budget.

It went so smoothly I had to pinch myself.

The show continued on that smooth path for the next few months as I auditioned more dancers; hired set, costume, and lighting designers; and assembled the production staff. Rehearsals went swiftly, sets were built, schedules came together, and soon we had an out-of-town opening at the Shubert Theater in Chicago set for July 2002, with a Broadway premiere to follow in October. For the longest time, the biggest headache was deciding what to title the show. Just about every phrase from a Billy Joel song was suggested (with the possible exception of *For the Longest Time*) before we settled on *Movin' Out*. It was a period of high-efficiency productivity. The choreography was coming together (a lot of it having been developed for the workshop production), but there were seeds of doubt already present about some aspects of the show, and the logic of the schedule kept us from looking at a few basic problems (see *denial*, above).

Our show bore little resemblance to the standard musical. There were no characters on stage breaking from dialogue into song. The action wasn't in the songs, it was in the dancing.

But the realities of the marketplace demanded that we call what we were presenting "a musical." When you're charging Broadway theater prices and trying to fill Broadway-sized houses, it makes the money people nervous to call what you're putting up onstage "dance," or, worse, "full-length ballet," even if you can work the word *rock* into the billing. So "a musical" is how we described the show that we first presented in front of a paying audience in Chicago.

There's a long tradition in the American musical theater of trying out Broadway-bound shows in towns like Chicago, Boston, New Haven, and Philadelphia. You do this to smooth out the production kinks, to let the performers find their legs, and to fix anything that doesn't work for the audience. With so much at stake, in an age when a poor opening night review in the *New York Times* can doom a show from the outset, little is left to chance.

I knew the balance between the songs and the staging was still a bit rough, but I hoped the show was strong enough that audiences wouldn't notice (see, again, *denial*). Particularly in some of the early numbers, I was letting Billy's songs tell the story instead of making the dance do it (see *judgment*, above). Billy's songs create wonderful characters, but there's no continuity from one to another—there was never supposed to be. Anthony, for example, in the song "Movin' Out" doesn't interact with Brenda from "Scenes from an Italian Restaurant." Yet in my story they do. I needed to tell my story and not worry about the story being told in the songs. We had recruited a fabulous band and a terrific pair of singers to perform the music. We knew the audience's love of Billy's songs would be a big part of its attraction to the show. We had, we felt, a team that was far better than any conventional musical could possibly present: better singers, and vastly better dancers, than any singer/dancer/actors could be. What we didn't have, however, was a conventional musical, and that was what the audience was expecting.

My worries were confirmed with the first week of preview performances in Chicago. The difficulties were there right from the beginning. They *began* with the beginning. We knew that the biggest name in the selling of this show was Billy Joel. So to get the audience primed for what was to come, we spotlighted the band on stage. Then we moved the band up and back (thanks to some very expensive hydraulics) and brought the dancers onto the stage. This confused the audience. They didn't know whether to look at the band or the dancers. They felt they were missing something. At a musical, you follow the person who's singing, right? Almost all musicals begin with an overture, but you don't *see* the overture; the orchestra's in the pit, and the audience knows it's not a part of the action. In this case, how were they supposed to know that? It took a couple of numbers for the audience to understand who was who, and that's too long. A crucial connection between audience and stage had been missed. That connection is the reason people love theater in the first place. They caught up with it eventually, but we weren't making it easy for them.

For one of the few times in my life, I sat in the theater each night and paid as much attention to the audience as I did to the performers onstage. What I saw was simple and clear: They were miserable and confused after Act One, but standing and cheering at the end of Act Two. Act Two was working. Act One was not.

One night I went outside and crossed the street to the restaurant where some of the audience goes during intermission. I overheard one waiter tell a couple, "Don't worry. The second act is much better." When the waiters in town know the problem and you don't do something about it, that's denial.

It wasn't possible to make major changes before the opening night in Chicago, and the resulting reviews were not kind, to say the least. The critics praised the dancers and they loved Act Two, but they thought Act One was confusing. They used words that had never been attached to my work before, words like "mess" and "risible." The show was in trouble.

My old friend Jennifer Tipton had flown in from New York for the opening. We had breakfast the next morning with the reviews in front of us. A Broadway veteran of thirty years, she didn't try to console me. She said, "You know they're right."

I nodded my head. "Yes, I know." This was, as the clichés have it, the first step toward a solution. Denial was no longer an option.

The next day, a Monday, I had to face a cast and crew that was bruised, tired, and worried. To compound the trauma, a New York newspaper had decided to reprint one of the scathing reviews, breaking the long tradition of letting Broadway-bound shows work out their kinks out of town in private. Publishing out-of-town reviews before a single New York performance was simply not done. This set off a public debate between the theater world and the press. *Movin' Out* had become news for all the wrong reasons. People, it seemed, were gunning for us.

Changes had to be made, and I would have three weeks in Chicago and only three rehearsal days in New York to make them before the first previews prior to our Broadway opening.

I was not a novice at the art of change. I knew the repertoire of tweak and cut and add and replace and reposition. I had been doing this for years.

What made this especially challenging is that there were so many different areas to look at. Was the problem in the music? I cut one song, thought about putting in three or four others, wound up adding one. Was the problem in the narrative? I simplified the story and pushed one character forward, so that more of the show revolved around him. To do that I had to shrink another character who had functioned almost as a narrator in one incarnation, like the Stage Manager in *Our Town*. Was the problem scenic or visual? We'd had some wig problems early on that made it hard for the audience to recognize the characters from one scene to the next, but the wardrobe and scenery now seemed pretty much okay. I'd replay the entire show in my head at night and wonder, Is the wrong song playing here? Is the wrong character in this scene? Are they coming in the wrong door? Are they doing the wrong steps? Everywhere I looked, I thought, Hey, let's fix *that*.

The wonderful and scary thing about solving creative problems is that there isn't one right answer. There are a thousand possible answers, but the valuable and practical thing to do is *fix the things you know how to fix*. That's why a failure of skill is unforgivable: If you don't have a broad base of skills, you're limiting the number of problems you can solve when trouble hits.

Fortunately, I had more than just the skill to choreograph. Most of the decisions that had to be made now were *directing* and *editing* choices, and I could do that, too. During the sleepless nights in Chicago when I reran the show from memory, I looked for the changes that would bring Act One into tighter focus and let Act Two run as gloriously as it had from the start. I was tempted to believe that the scenes worked fine in their current order—just because I had seen them that way for so long now (see *repetition*, above). But I needed to resist that temptation. It was time to clean the slate and look at everything fresh.

My support came from my routine, my sustenance from my rituals of self-reliance. I made it a point of honor to be at the gym, two blocks away from my hotel room, each morning at 7:00 A.M. for a two-hour workout. I needed the routine not just for endurance, it was also important for me to believe that I was still

in shape, that my body functioned. If everything fell apart and I was wiped out, I could always go back to dancing. At night after each show, with my mind still racing, I would follow the same comforting heat ritual, pouring myself into a hot bath and letting my brain go blank.

The producers, to their credit, were supportive. While I was making changes onstage, they could have made the ultimate change: fire me and bring in another director to save the show. But they didn't. They rallied around us. We were all in this together, paddling a leaky canoe in a choppy stream heading toward New York City. Our mantra was "Stay in the canoe."

When I was making all these changes, in effect I was scratching again, trying to claw out an idea that would clarify the show for the audience. To some degree, the scratching and changes worked. The show was getting better. It wasn't frozen yet, but at least it was Jell-O.

I also listened to people I trusted. One friend told me she had sat next to a woman at a performance who put her hands over her eyes for one song and then over her ears for another. My friend asked the woman at intermission, "What's going on? Don't you like it?"

"Oh no," said the woman, "I like it. I just don't know where to get my information."

This was echoed by another friend, a major director, who told me, "You're doing too much, trying too hard. Make each scene about one thing, not three things."

Making the changes was a brutal process. When you cut and replace words on your computer, the words don't have feelings; they can't talk back to you. It's the same when you work with film at an editing bay or with acrylics at an easel. Film and paint don't cry "foul." But I was dealing with human beings. When I enlarged a part or cut a role, people's noses got out of joint.

One of the most important changes was to scale back the lighting on the band; we had to make it clearer to the audience that the dancers were the story. Musicians are usually the coolest of pros, but they howled when we took the spotlights off them. Still, they understood that it was in their interest (spelled

j-o-b-s) for the show to work. They accepted the change as gracefully as could be expected.

From my life in the dance world, I understood the diva mind-set of gifted performers. I was asking a huge amount from them. They had to rehearse all day to learn the material we were changing, then had to pour their hearts out at night onstage in the old show that had received those terrible notices, at least until the new version was ready to be unveiled. For every cut I made in a dancer's role I tried to make it up in another part of the show.

This was dangerous work, a high-wire act. When you make a change, it has to be a win-win change. You have to hack out something that doesn't work and replace it with something that does. I knew that I would only get one chance to make each change for the better. If I tested out a change, dismissed it, and went back to the old way, I'd start to lose the cast's trust. *Hadn't that come out because it wasn't working? What makes it any better now?* I didn't need the perfect solution to every problem, but I did need a workable solution—a lot of them.

Even after we had cut secondary characters, taken out several songs, and centered the show's conflicts on just a few characters, the audience was still confused. At this point, bless their coal-black little hearts, the critics turned out to be enormously useful. My son, Jesse, back in New York, did a marvelous thing. He knew I couldn't stomach reading the reviews too closely, so he read them all and took out the venom, concentrating on the substance of the critiques. He charted their comments, and when we found more than two critics citing the same problem we said, "Okay, this is a hot zone."

The one thing all the critics agreed on was that the show lacked an effective opening number. The time had come to tackle that problem at last.

Once you climb out of denial, it's easy to see what you need to do. I had been so hell-bent on breaking the status quo and flouting convention with *Movin' Out* that I had failed to see how convention might be my salvation. Going back and reviewing the opening numbers for dozens of successful musicals (scratch in the best places), I found that many of them used the ancient device of a prologue to

introduce the characters. That would be our answer: a prologue. At this point, a new muse, Serendipity, dropped into our lives. Actually, she came first to Santo Loquasto, my production designer. Santo was in a supermarket when Billy Joel's song "It's Still Rock and Roll to Me" came over the store's sound system. As he walked the aisles of the store, Santo noticed that the 4/4 beat of the song perfectly matched the rhythm of the opening to a twenty-year-old dance of mine called *Ocean's Motion*, which was set to Chuck Berry songs. It takes an extraordinarily perceptive colleague to pick up on a similarity like this; this was not the first time I was thrilled to have Santo on my side. I checked it out, and Billy's song and the old steps fit together beautifully, and even better, it had roles for five principals, just what we needed. I pulled out a tape of *Ocean's Motion*, taught the steps to the cast, and—voilà!—we had a new opening number for all twenty-four dancers, taught and staged in one three-hour session. We finally had an opening that let the audience shake hands with the dancers.

We still had the problem of setting the audience's expectations before they walked in the door. That word *musical* was in the way. But what else could we call it? The audience was loving what we were doing now, it was blowing them away, and maybe we don't want to call it dance, but what else is it?

It was Billy who broke the logjam on this issue. "Why not just call it its title?" he asked. "Then we won't have to call it anything."

And so *Movin' Out, The New Broadway Musical* became, simply, *Movin' Out*.

And in the end, it was all worth the effort. The audience, which had loved Act Two all along, was no longer confused by the beginning. The reviews in New York were much more fun to read than the ones in Chicago had been.

In the end, grueling as it was, my fast turn with failure was an empowering experience. When *Movin' Out* "failed" in Chicago, I had two ways to respond: (a) stay in denial, bring the show "as is" to New York, and take my chances that the New York critics would miss the flaws that the Chicago reviewers so obviously picked up; or (b) dig in and fix things, see the out-of-town reviews as a blessing, a reprieve, a miracle shot at getting a second chance.

Obviously, I took the latter course. But the same goes for you. Failing, and learning from it, is necessary. Until you've done it, you're missing an important piece of your creative arsenal.

## Give Yourself a Second Chance

No matter who you are, at some point you will present your work to the world—and the world will find it wanting. Patrons shrug. Critics hiss. Audiences stay away in droves. Even loyal friends avert their eyes.

Incredibly, there is good news here. Sometimes you will fail, but the world will give you a second chance to get it right.

This happens every day in the film business. A film director gets to shoot a scene over and over again until he is satisfied. If he's still not satisfied the next day, he can rewrite the scene and shoot it again. If an actor isn't working out, the director hires someone else. Later on, he gets a few more second chances in postproduction. He can cover up his sins by editing and re-editing. He can alter the entire mood of a film by replacing the music score. He gets yet another chance when the finished cut is shown to preview audiences. With so much money on the line, film people like to test the market—and sometimes the director will accept the audiences' comments and make more changes. In many ways a director's job is how he uses all his second chances.

When I worked with Milos Forman on *Amadeus* in 1980, I noted a distinct change in his work habits and attitude in the three years since we had worked together on *Hair*. *Hair* had not been a happy experience for Milos. He was tormented by his producers during filming, even though he was fresh off the critical and commercial success of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, which had swept all five major Academy Awards. The *Hair* experience ran so counter to Milos's sense of artistry and control that he would sometimes "nap" for sixteen hours rather than face the bullying producers. *Hair* did some business (as they say) but it was not the success we all were hoping for.

Milos applied everything he'd learned about power and control on the set of *Hair* to *Amadeus*. On *Amadeus*, he was not only the director, he was also a producer. If it failed, at least he would have the certainty that it was *his* failure, accomplished without compro-

mises. He stacked everything in his favor: He made sure he had a great story in Peter Shaffer's original play, which had succeeded with audiences around the world. He had sublime music, all Mozart, to work with. He had great locations in Prague. Many of the actors, from both sides of the Atlantic, were either friends or people who had worked with him before. There were no star egos to deal with. Milos was taking no chances—and the results speak for themselves.

Not every art form offers such comfort, or tosses you a life jacket. A sculptor whose work is deemed a failure cannot go back and rework the metal, clay, or stone. He must absorb the criticism and do better the next time. It's pretty much the same for painters and photographers. You don't get do-overs in the plastic arts.

It's the same in the dance world: No do-overs. You mount your ballet, the audience applauds or yawns, which determines whether the work gets mounted again. A hit can be revived season after season. A flop is forgotten within a week.

Wouldn't it be nice if we could predict and preempt a work's less-than-favorable reception, if we could give ourselves a second chance before we find out we really need it?

Well, actually we often can. Before I sent this manuscript to my publisher, I showed it to twelve trusted friends, and factored their comments into the text. Where more than one of them was confused by a section of text, I reworked it to make it clearer. By building failure, or at least the prospect of failure, into the process, I gave myself a second chance.

By acknowledging failure, you take the first step to conquering it.

## Build Your Own Validation Squad

We all seek approval and validation for our efforts. In the beginning we desperately seek the approval of others—of *anybody*—to assure us that we're on the right path, that we aren't wasting our time, that we haven't made a monumental error. But that neediness fades as we get older and more confident. We become a better and clearer judge of our own work. If a piece is good, we know it before the public applauds and the reviews come in. If it's bad, we know that, too. As Montaigne said, "We easily confess to others an ad-

vantage of courage, strength, experience, activity, and beauty. But an advantage in judgment we yield to none."

Don't misunderstand. I'm not saying that it is all right to be a self-contained, solipsistic, don't-give-a-damn-what-anyone-thinks egotist operating under the credo of "As long as I like it, it's good." That way lies madness, or at least embarrassing self-indulgence. But there comes a time when you have no choice but to trust your judgment above all others'. As Billy Wilder once said, "If I like something, I am lucky enough, fool enough, or smart enough to believe that other people are going to like it too." Circular logic? Yes. But at least *you* are drawing the circle.

As we mature, we need to build criticism into the working process, as we do with failure. For a long time now I've had my own validation squad, a small group of people I invite to see my works in progress. I trust them to look at my crudest, clumsiest noodlings and reward me with their candor. I put a lot of faith in what they say. My criteria for these validators are very basic: I pick people who (a) have talents I admire greatly (so I know they have judgment), (b) happen to be my friends (so I know they have my best interests at heart), (c) don't feel they are competing with me (so I know they have no agenda no matter what they say), and (d) have hammered my work in the past (so I know they are capable of brutal honesty). I don't want my feelings spared; I want an honest answer to the eternal question "Do we care?" If you choose your validators, you never have to look at them and wonder "Who died and made you God?" Because you did.

Look around you. Who are the brightest, most talented people you know? Choose them, "qualify" them (in the same way that a salesperson "qualifies" customers by determining if they have the money to buy, a need for the product, and the authority to make the buying decision), and then get them involved. All you need are people with good judgment in other parts of their lives who care about you and will give you their honest opinion with no strings attached. The last point is crucial: All things being equal, the validation that matters most is the kind that comes with no agenda.