In an overheated basement studio at Barnard College, a dancer twirls with smartphone in hand, eyes fixed on an inch-wide video of the steps she should take. Two others windmill their arms, looking like Olympic swimmers warming up poolside. They’re practicing a piece called “Harmonic,” trying to get the swings’ arc and momentum just right. “It’s really unnatural!” one of them says. Supervising, choreographer Claudia Schreier ’08 instructs, “Don’t let those get too pretty.”

Schreier creates neoclassical and contemporary ballets, and has worked with professionals from companies like the New York City Ballet and American Ballet Theatre, as well as students from top academies like the School of American Ballet and the Ailey School. In this rehearsal, she is setting her dance on members of the Columbia Ballet Collaborative, for the group’s tenth-anniversary performance in April. “To set a dance on” someone basically means to teach them the sequence of steps, but the phrase evokes something deeper: a choreographer’s idea made concrete. Doing this requires that she convey to the dancers not just how the piece should look, but how it should feel.

“Harmonic,” driven by busy, rhythmically complex music by Dutch composer Douwe Eisenega, feels restless, almost anxious. The piece asks the dancers to hold themselves in suspension—Schreier has likened the sensation to the tipping point at the top of a roller-coaster—and also for them to make themselves miss the music’s beat and then rush to catch up. The press of time, of course, is something that ballet dancers—like few artists but many elite athletes—know intimately. Training starts in early childhood; the extent of an individual’s potential is commonly thought to have revealed itself by adolescence; performance peaks not long afterward.

Growing up, Schreier studied classical ballet and dreamed of being a dancer, but was frustrated by her physical limitations: “Ballet is built to make you hate yourself. You’re striving for perfection every time, and it’s un-
Schreier took classes that exposed her toing partnered dances. But when she was
er in 2015, she hasn’t felt confident creat-
professionally, Schreier told an interview-
taking wing. Because she never danced
ern material, and had to be reminded to hold
ballet training, but gravitated toward mod-
ern dance technique and training. They
al in the art, she says, and not fight against
impossible ideals. Then she adds, with a
“it’s the love of my life, so…”
This trajectory seems to have defined her
idea of choreography’s essential joy: “You en-
vision how you want to dance, or how you
think dance should look, and you’re pro-
vided with bodies that can achieve what you
can’t.” When Schreier went to college
rather than conservatory, she found kindred
spirits in the undergraduate ballet company
and contemporary dance ensemble: unsure
if they wanted to, or could, pursue dance professionally; unsure what they would do
instead. “I got to work with these dancers
who were—fearless, in a way that I can only
truly appreciate now. It’s part of the Harvard
mentality,” she continues. “You just go, go, go.
Her classmates were energetic and un-
jaded, and they trusted her enough to take
physical risks and test out her ideas.
Through the Harvard Dance Program,
Schreier took classes that exposed her to
modern dance technique and training. They
stoked her interest in exploring moves out-
side the ballet lexicon: heaving chests, und-
ulating backs, hips turned in a different
way. The challenges of her in-between style
became most apparent last spring, she says,
when she crisscrossed Manhattan each week
to choreograph at the Ailey School and Bal-
let Academy East. The Ailey students all had
ballet training, but gravitated toward mod-
ern material, and had to be reminded to hold
themselves up and their cores in. On the flip
side, with the classically tutored BAE stu-
dents, “I had to kind of take them on this
journey through realizing that I wasn’t try-
ing to undo their ballet training, I was just
trying to use it in a different way.”
Pieces like “Harmonic” torque ballet’s
usual geometry. The shapes look familiar,
but the way the dancers get into them
seems less placed, and more organic. The
rhythm is deceptively loose. At the same
time, Schreier’s work often seems gov-
erned by a sense of cool rationality. At
times, the dancers look like marionettes
testing the hinges of their bodies, system-
atically measuring their range of motion.
The way she arranges them in space is
reminiscent of Muybridge photographs,
breaking down a horse’s gallop or a bird
taking wing. Because she never danced
professionally, Schreier told an interview-
er in 2015, she hasn’t felt confident creat-
ing partnered dances. But when she was

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Harvard Business School has a vener-
able tradition, anchored in its general-
management unit, of drawing on the
humanities to illuminate problems in
capitalism (see “Questions of Charac-
ter,” July-August 2006, page 12). Now
Mizuho Financial Group professor of fi-
nance Mihir A. Desai, an expert on taxa-
tion, aims to “humanize finance” through
The Wisdom of Finance (Houghton Mifflin
Harcourt), is an effort to rescue the field from excessive focus on self-enrichment;
along the way, Desai also applies financial tools to the humanities. Recollecting from
the villains like Theodore Dreiser’s Financier and Gordon Gekko, he makes this discovery,
from the final chapter of O Pioneers!

...Willa Cather’s portrait of Alexandra
Bergson is the story that truly belongs in
every finance textbook. Alexandra is a
first-generation immigrant from Sweden
living on the plains of Nebraska, respon-
sible for a family farm and three younger
brothers at the turn of the last century.
She is a model financier who employs
many of the lessons of finance without
slipping into the traps that those antihe-
roes do.

Consider Alexandra: just as her broth-
ers exhort her to sell their land at rock-
bottom prices during a crisis, she pro-
poses…using leverage to go in the exact
opposite direction by buying more near-
by land….Her complex financing plan,
which involves mortgaging the home-
stead, features debt service payments
well into the future that will only work if
she’s right about the future of land prices.
…How does she assess the risks? She
samples. She and her youngest brother,
Emil, take a trip to explore all the neigh-
boring counties and “talked to the men
about their crops and to the women
about their poultry….She learned a great
deal.”

She discovers option value in the near-
by land. Other properties hold limited
risk and limited return. “Down there they
have a little certainty, but up with us
there is a big chance.”…

Her brother Lou seeks certainty about
her prediction: “But how do you know
that land is going to go up enough to pay
the mortgages?” Alexandra knows that
the risk is insoluble and replies, “I know,
that’s all. When you drive over the coun-
try you can feel it coming.” Experience
and imagination allow her to confront the
uncertainty….

Finally, as Alexandra contemplates
what to do with her land and the legacy
of her success after she is gone, she con-
siders gifting it to her nieces and nephews….“The land belongs to the fu-
ture…; that’s the way it seems to me.
How many of the names on the county
clerk’s plat will be there in fifty years? I
might as well try to will the sunset over
there to my brother’s children. We come
and go, but the land is always here. And
the people who love it and understand it
are the people who own it—for a little
while.” She understands herself to be a
steward, a link in an ongoing chain,
charged with taking care of resources….

For Cather, there are ultimately only a
few stories that all of our lives end up
resembling. Some of them, as we’ve seen,
are tales of hollow accumulation and in-
satiable desire. Some are tales of heart
and hard work. It is up to us to choose
amongst them wisely. I recommend Al-
exandra Bergson’s story.
invited by her mentor Damian Woetzel, M.P.A. ’07, to show new work at the Vail International Dance Festival last summer, a duet became the centerpiece. Her piece “Solitaire” begins with three male dancers dexterously spinning a female soloist into various positions, then supporting her in triumphant, acrobatic lifts with her limbs fully extended. Then two of the men exit; in Schreier’s telling, “It goes from very presentational and very regal, and all of a sudden, everything goes awry.” Scored with Alfred Schnittke’s dissonant strings and tinkling music-box piano, the woman gets maneuvered, almost manipulated, into different shapes by her partner. He holds her in what comes to seem like Svengali-like sway; at one point, she’s almost completely hidden from the audience’s view, encased in his arms and torso. The romantic ideal so central to many pas de deux—of femininity made virtuosic, and put on display—takes on a disturbing cast. This is one of Schreier’s most narrative works, and in it, exploration of form gives way, just a little, to feeling.

This summer, Schreier will return to the Vail festival, and present two evening-length performances of her work at New York’s Joyce Theater. Only recently has she gained a stream of commissions sufficient to enable her to leave her day job in arts administration and pursue choreography full-time. (Her work has also been enabled by a program at the New York Choreographic Institute and a fellowship from NYU’s ballet center, both offering financial support and studio space.) Dancers, Schreier jokes, can be fatalistic, and she’s come to accept that her career will be unpredictable. She sees her recent successes less as growing momentum than as a run of good luck: “It makes me appreciate the moment more, because it’s not promised.” A recent knee injury—and her thirtieth birthday—triggered another realization about her craft: “The beauty of it is, it can be forever. Dancing, I would be done by now.” As a choreographer, her career is just beginning.

After the last run-through of that day’s rehearsal, the Columbia dancers wait for Schreier’s notes. She begins by thanking them for their good work; her biggest critique is that everyone is anticipating the music too much, so they’re a little ahead of the count. Instead, she tells them, “Sink into it.”

**How Buildings Move People**

_Museum exhibition designer Justin Lee_

_**by Lily Scherlis**_

_The museum gallery is a space designed to be in permanent flux. In 2008, artist Michael Asher sat down with 10 years of exhibition blueprints from the Santa Monica Museum of Art, reviewing the designs of 44 shows that had gone up in the main gallery. He then reinstalled the underlying armature of each and every temporary wall, now only metal skeletons stripped of the drywall that formerly gave them substance. All past configurations were present simultaneously, filling the room with a dense metallic labyrinth. The original walls had been built to disappear into the background, in order to highlight the art they displayed; Asher’s reconstructions exposed the transience of that art, and the off-putting flexibility of the space it inhabited. Looking at images of the work feels like catching a glimpse of something the institution wants to hide: the bones of the gallery itself. A similar sensation comes up in conversation with Justin Lee, exhibition designer at the Harvard Art Museums. He knows the new museum better than anyone, having designed the building as project architect while affiliated with the Renzo Piano Building Workshop, which Harvard hired to renovate the museums. Lee earned a master’s in architecture at Harvard’s Graduate School of Design in 2004, so when the workshop took on the project, he was the natural pick for the job. (As a student, Lee lived on the corner of Prescott Street and Broadway, mere feet away. Each morning and evening, he strolled past the museums’ previous incarnation, unaware that he would effect a_