

Writing about *When The Sky Separated From The Earth*  
Michael J. Morris, PhD

Around the 7th or 8th century BCE, Hesiod wrote about the marriage of Gaia—the Earth—and Ouranos—the Sky. With Ouranos, Gaia bore many children, including the Titans, the Cyclopes, and three monstrous giants called the Hecatoncheires. Ouranos imprisoned the Hecatoncheires in the ground where they suffered in anguish, and in retaliation, Gaea compelled her son Kronos to castrate his father Ouranos, overthrowing his patriarchal tyranny.

Thus, the Sky was separated from the Earth.

This is one of countless myths that comes with me into the dark at the start of *When The Sky Separated From The Earth*, directed and performed by Ani Javian and Benjamin Roach on 31 May 2024 in Barnett Theatre in Sullivant Hall on the campus of The Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio.

*When The Sky Separated From The Earth* dances in a contingent space where voices, bodies, and objects becoming organized and disorganized in ways both compelling and unruly. It unfolds between excursions roaming toward the limits of the reasonable, laughter erupting from bursts of the unexpected, and possibilities groaning at the edges of belief. The performers scramble to occupy the space where the mythical, the actual, and the confessional overlap, interrupt, and sometimes contradict one another. The stage space overflows its borders from the start, with props and garments strewn throughout the audience, ready and available to be brought into action—and this overflow foreshadows an exuberance of movement that stirs from stationary postures into escalating undulations, growing erratic then tempered, filling the space then retreating to restrained territories, approaching ecstatic frenzy again and again before finally settling into exhausted surrender and support.

The piece begins with Javian tucked into the audience as if in a roadside shrine—a pretend priestess or an oracle composed of maybe whatever was just lying around—veils and shells, a loaf of bread and denim shorts. She sings, “In the beginning there was no beginning,” and incants a creation myth of darkness, chaos, water, and wind, the naming of things, the attribution of distinct beings emerging into the beginnings of their inevitable endings. This opening story-song feels sacred without taking itself too seriously, make-believe met with laughter, a laughing matter that we may yet still ponder. She removes pieces and layers of her costume, then is joined by Roach in parallel poses upstage. One is now two—the insistent legacy of distinction. What came before was more like a preamble or perhaps a prophecy; from now on, this dance is inescapably a duet.

From their angular poses, hips and spines begin to roll, increasing in range and intensity, becoming thrusting and lunging, leading into a section that builds to a bacchanalian free-for-all. Accelerating exits and entrances drive toward a heightened state of extended spontaneity. The movement feels off-balance, as if tumbling through space, lurching, spiraling, shimmying, collapsing, dropping into splits. They begin to forage through the seats of the audience, bringing assorted pieces of clothing and yards of fabric, two-by-fours, books, and other props out into the space. They interact with members of the audience in abrupt but seemingly sincere exchanges. I am given a necklace of shells, and later Javian gnaws at a loaf of bread, leaving a piece on the seat next to me before later dramatically giving birth to the whole loaf, calling it “Eve,” and leaving her to rest beside me as well. Roach takes my seatmate’s shoe, shouts into it like a telephone, circles back around, gestures toward slipping the shoe on Cinderella-style, then just gives up. This whole section feels like a radical

practice of YES AND, with permission to try things out, get weird, see where things develop, and let them go at any moment, with something like simultaneous reverence and disregard for classifying things as sacred or profane. It feels as if anything can become significant but could also be abandoned at any moment.

The piece does not shy away from what could be considered taboo. The rolling, thrusting hips early on prefigure later moments of humping the floor, spreading their legs, and touching themselves. Both performers strip to their underwear before dressing again in matching pleated skirts, like pretty senshi anime characters, early-aughts pop star video vixens, and countless porn films acting out schoolgirl fantasies. Both move through erotic posing, with Javian escalating into more explicitly simulated sex, narrating, “Hey Ben, the first time I had sex, it was like this.” She deliriously demonstrates us a series of positions—on all fours, on her back, straddling and riding that “D”—as Roach asks skeptically, “... this was your *first* time?” Dancing at the edge of the pornographic, Javian suddenly redirects us toward rupture when she tells us that it feels good to lie. They go back and forth about lies, the stories we tell, the stories we make up, what is or is not real, and what we do or do not believe, before Javian exits and Roach plays a brief tune on a keyboard that is leaning vertically in a chair in the back row of the audience. It is clear that we are swimming in the realm of creation myths and origin stories—how it began and “my first time”—stories that may be fantasies, lies, beliefs, memories, revisionist histories, or in some way all of the above.

Throughout the dance, Javian and Roach cycle through different roles, voices, accents, and characters, all of them temporary, like a crowd of interlocutors each just waiting their turn to emerge. Javian resumes the role of storyteller, asking, “Do you ever wonder where it all came from—all of it—all of this?” while Roach becomes a kinetic sculpture of scraps of wood leaning or balancing on his body, like the wrong way to build a fire but no less combustible. Sometimes they are themselves, addressing each other as “Ani” and “Ben.” Sometimes they are microorganisms drifting in primordial waters, but with a working-class buddy vibe and accents that could maybe be from Jersey or Philly. Sometimes they are queens pacing through the space with shimmering sheer fabric trailing behind them. For a while, Roach talks to us like an AI virtual assistant repeatedly missing the mark of requested tasks, then transforms into an over-the-top show barker hyping the audience about tank full of sharks. Then they are cam girls in plaid skirts and tank tops, spreading their legs and posing sexy for the viewer. These shifting characters or personas chip away at the stability of identity, as if to ask, “If I could be anyone, who might I become?” Each of these roles seems both intentional and also arbitrary, charged with potential significance—the lineages of oral traditions, the evolution of life on the planet, the digitized labor of sex work—but also with a sense that they could have been anything. Anything could have been charged with the potency of meaning, and from that expanse of possibilities, these are the roles they chose.

This is a core theme for me as I witness *When The Sky Separated From The Earth*: the intentional treatment of what could have been random, the significance of the arbitrary not because of any intrinsic properties but because it was chosen and handled in the ways that it was. At one point, they begin to organize the various props scattered across the stage into orderly lines. There’s no apparent reason why one object is placed alongside another or the next, but in these composed topographies something purposeful begins to emerge. It didn’t have to be this way, but now it is this way. Much of the movement throughout the piece feels like this as well, with steps and gestures sequenced with one another in ways that are not necessary, that may be entirely arbitrary, but are nevertheless sufficient for something meaningful to be glimpsed. And isn’t this how we have tried to answer the question about where this all came from all along, cobbling together pieces and fragments of what

we find lying around into thousands and thousands of guesses and speculations and—most of all—our stories?

The final section of the dance is a duet that begins in unison, with repeated gestures and phrases shifting directions in ways that are clear and measured—small precise steps, swinging arms, nodding heads, rotating more or less in place. These are steps and gestures that did not have to go together but *have* gone together, if for no other reason than they are repeated in this way over and over. Then there comes a moment when they break into new movement that gets wilder and wilder, pushing them toward more and more possibilities, as if to ask: when do we dare to go beyond familiar repetitions into something else? How do we rewild bodies and stories that have been tamed through doing them the same way again and again for so long? As exhaustion sets in, they both eventually arrive at incessantly repeating the statement, “I don’t know.” Their movements circle each other, coming closer and closer into one another’s reach and embrace. The piece began with one becoming two, and it ends with two moving and speaking as one. We are left with the undeniable condition of all of our stories, all of our myths, and all of our dances. We don’t know—perhaps we cannot know—and it is in this not knowing that we choose what to put together, not as an answer to our questions, but as a way of making meaning without answers. These are the dark waters where we began. And perhaps this does turn out to be a castration of patriarchy, abandoning the tyrannical demand for certainty and insisting on making art—making meaning—precisely because we do not know.