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Page 2 of 2 < [Back](#)

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A Choreographer Steps Into Antiwar Movement

The piece is also full of outright lies -- the title being the first one, as the piece is quite openly about Iraq, with piercing references to the cruelties at [Abu Ghraib](#) and the ambiguity of "evidence." It is also *not* about Iraq; it's more broadly about manipulation and reality and how difficult it is to tell the difference even when you're in the same room with them.

Key to Marks's success is that she plays fair. She spoofs herself as well, a choreographer with control over another person and over our perceptions. "Not About Iraq" begins with dancer Taisha Paggett moving serenely through a contemplative solo, while Marks, from the sidelines, coos praise.

"This is soooo beautiful," she sighs aloud, admiring her handiwork as Paggett performs. "This is civilized." It's also sexy, she tells us, and it means "everything is okay." This she repeats dozens of times, even after Paggett falls to the floor in stubborn repudiation.

At another point, Paggett does the talking, tossing out labels as she strikes various simple poses. "This is a terrorist," the dancer says, standing still and looking like, well, anybody just standing still. "This is a joke. You know what this is."

She arches into a backbend. "This is a confession. This is a cupcake." Your understanding gets all messed up. You wonder what you're supposed to make of what you see, how to pick out the real meaning from the irony. That, says Marks, is the dilemma we face in this age of spin.

"I think it's a huge conundrum," she says, pushing her reading glasses up into her close-cropped gray hair. "There's a lot of screens and mirrors and smoke, and still I have to act. . . . When Taisha says 'You know what this is,' even though meaning is so obfuscated -- that a melting backbend can be a cupcake -- you still have to trust so you can act. My sense is, American democracy is in trouble because we understand that spin is everywhere and there's no way to know what's happening."

Marks isn't the first dancemaker to sound an alarm about a thorny, little-understood issue that defines an age -- but she's one of the few to do it well. Her title pays homage to

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Maria Gillespie, left, and Noellie Bordelet rehearse "Not About Iraq" in Chicago. The work will be performed in Washington on Saturday and Sunday at Dance Place. "I feel very critical of myself," choreographer Victoria Marks, below, says of the issues she's tackling, "because I don't know how to act as a citizen. How do I really know what's going on? What is the truth?" (Photos By Warren Skalski For The Washington Post)

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Neil Greenberg's landmark 1994 piece, "Not-About-AIDS-Dance," one of the first dance works to confront the epidemic. After losing many friends and his brother to the disease, Greenberg says, he felt he had no choice but to address AIDS in his art.

It's especially tricky for a choreographer, says Greenberg, who attended "Not About Iraq's" premiere in [Los Angeles](#) last fall, because dance -- an art of action -- isn't well suited to being "about" a concept. Marks is courageous, in his view, for "raising the issue and trying to get at it from all the angles in a form that's often a form of escape, but also touches on every aspect of lived life."

It was the richness of the movement that first struck Carla Perlo, Dance Place's founder and director, when she saw "Not About Iraq." "It's like an extraordinary expanse of free expression, flung from the inside, and then it's just caught," she says. "You wonder, is this improvised or is it choreographed?"

That seeming spontaneity in the work is all the more remarkable considering Marks, unlike most choreographers, cannot physically demonstrate what she wants her dancers to do. Her dream of dancing in [New York](#) ended early: While in her 20s, she herniated a disk in her spine (she had danced with the late downtown artist Arnie Zane, among others), saddling her with enduring discomfort.

Marks, however, is nothing if not resourceful: To break into the dance world, she had worked as a janitor and electrician at the experimental hub Dance Theater Workshop. Now, she became expert at directing other dancers with words alone. A Fulbright fellowship to [London](#) followed; she returned there a few years later to teach and make dance films at the London Contemporary Dance School. Then came the offer from UCLA. Work in the studio is less frequent, especially now that she's raising twin 7-year-old sons with her husband, Dan Froot, a performance artist and fellow academic.

That new phase of life, combined with 9/11 and seeing dance from outside the bubble of New York -- all fell into "Not About Iraq." "Did I dare to do something different?" she asked herself. "As a dancer, there's an ingrained passivity about the world. You don't change the way things are done. You're made docile by the discipline."

She leans back, and the bright sunlight from an overhead window dances off the glasses perched on her head. "I think it's very productive to fall out of love with dance," she says with a little laugh. "Dissonance is interesting."

< [Back](#) [1](#) [2](#)

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