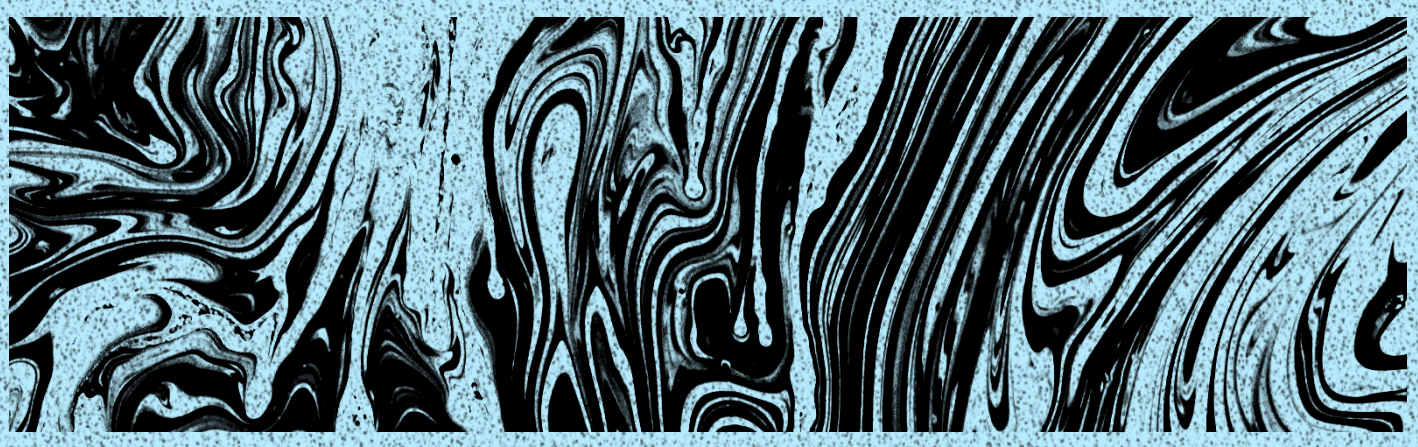
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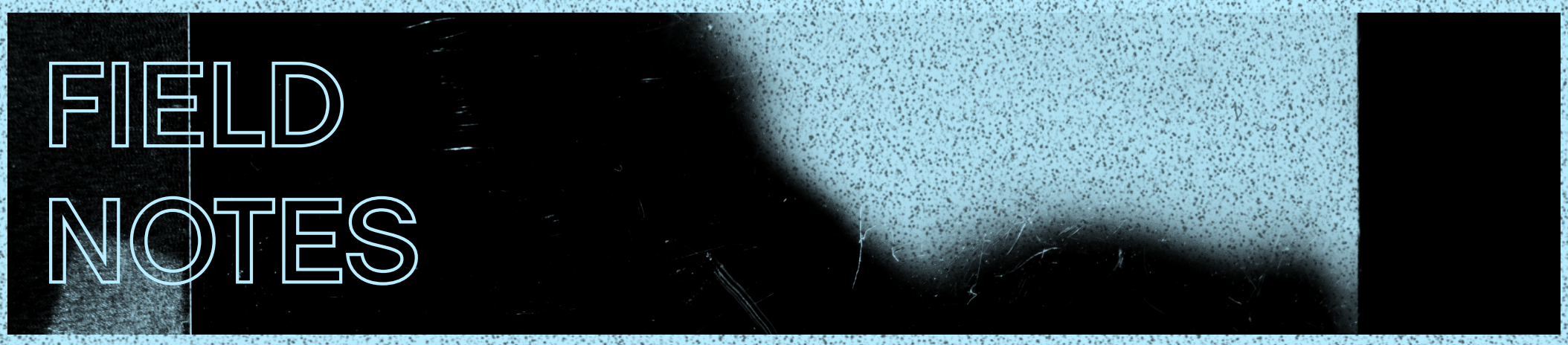


Conversations outside of time
by Farrin Foster

reflecting on

Agitato
by Jo Lloyd

Performed at Australian Dance Theatre,
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Here are some things I worried about while sitting in the Odeon theatre, waiting for choreographer Jo Lloyd’s Agitato to begin:

Do I make conversation difficult? / Money (specifically not having enough of it) / Potentially not understanding anything about Agitato, but still having to write about it / If my leg is casually leaning against my partner’s leg, or perhaps, somehow, I mixed up who is sitting where in the semi-darkness and I’m actually pressing my calf against a stranger's calf / Is it even possible for me to understand contemporary dance since I am barely connected to my own body? / Whether I have an ear infection or just an unusually itchy ear.

Then, fortunately, Agitato began.



'Agitato' (2026) by Jo Lloyd. Photo by Darren Gill.



The opening movement (is this the right term in contemporary dance?) of Agitato contains no movement. The house lights go down, the stage lights come up on an empty stage, and an excerpt of Fanny Mendelssohn's composition 'Allegro molto agitato in D Minor' fills the space. The music is restless (yes, this is a direct and uncreative translation of Agitato), like my pre-show thoughts. The music is also dramatic. Something terrible (many terrible things, in truth) is happening somewhere, it reminds us, and here you are sitting in a theatre thinking about your itchy ear.

If Mendelssohn's original 'Allegro molto agitato in D Minor' is restless and dramatic, then the remixes and re-imaginations of it created by composer Duane Morrison to score Agitato are restless and dramatic, while also embracing the stressful and absurd. The score is characterised by a stop-start motif that will stay with me for days, creating gaps in my thinking. It is strange to have the absence of music stuck like a riff in your head, but this is what will remain – the sense of a cacophony of sounds suddenly ceasing right on a climactic beat. I cannot recall the cacophony itself with any certainty, but the silence is consuming.

'Agitato' (2026) by Jo Lloyd. Photo by Darren Gill.

Agitato's cast of four dancers – which includes choreographer Lloyd performing alongside Rebecca Jensen, Louie Wisby, and Thomas Woodman – appear (not all at once, but eventually finding themselves together on stage as though by accident) after Mendelssohn's audio-only prologue. They, like Morrison's music, move in cacophonous ways. Stopping and starting with the soundscape, stuck during the absence of noise like children caught out in a game of musical chairs; they freeze in positions that underline the inorganic nature of the pause. Bent over slightly, hands on softened knees, in a somehow cartoonish pose, ribcages rising and falling just slightly. Or they are caught in an exaggerated downward dog, or partway into a lunge, their heels still lifted – steely and unmoving – hovering with perfect discipline above the stage floor. Between the enforced stillness, when the music crashes back into the space, the dancers move frenetically, the absurdity of the notes infusing into the flailing of their limbs. It is highly controlled chaos, and the effect is as silly as that phrase sounds. This silliness feels uncomfortably relatable, I realise – having briefly forgotten to worry about my ear. This absurd and constant tension between a state of stress and a state of freeze is, indeed, silly. It is also inescapable, a condition of modern existence. And here it is on stage, scored originally by Mendelssohn more than 150 years ago, re-imagined for contemporary ears by Morrison, and masterminded and choreographed by Lloyd. An expression of the intolerable nature of the everyday highlighted across centuries.



'Agitato' (2026) by Jo Lloyd. Photo by Darren Gill.



The staccato stop-start of Agitato’s opening scenes moves gradually into longer sequences. But the tension between freeze and frenzy remains in the work’s sharp punctuations, which see the cast often and suddenly changing direction or pace. In one moment, they are side of stage in a line-up, slowly and gently raising an arm each to create a curiously vulnerable image reminiscent of ballerinas learning at the barre, and within a fraction of a second they are gone – abruptly falling into a series of sweeping, jerky individualised movement sequences that scatter them in different directions. Throughout all this, each dancers’ face remains consistently blank, opening neither to the audience nor to their castmates. There is something creepy in this presentation – particularly in combination with the uniform-like costumes Andrew Treloar has clothed them in for the majority of the work.

'Agitato' (2026) by Jo Lloyd. Photo by Darren Gill.

Clad in dark blue polos and lightly pleated pants of the same colour, moving with their bodies but not with their faces, there is a strong sense that the dancers are controlled by larger forces. The agitation of the movements, the intolerability of existence recalled by the music and their limbs, quietly gains an extra dimension as lack of agency weaves its way into the images on stage. In another sequence, the dancers walk fluidly on the spot, going nowhere, recalling video game NPCs stuck against a wall in a background frame. Through some choreographic magic, the dancers then skilfully begin to move around the stage while still appearing to be walking on the spot. They are pawns on a chess board redirected toward whatever fate is deemed appropriate.



'Agitato' (2026) by Jo Lloyd. Photo by Darren Gill.



There is a watertight connection between Morrison’s score and Lloyd’s choreography – the depth of their 20 year-long collaboration resonates in the relationship that exists not just between movement and sound, but in the perfectly calibrated tonal shifts mirrored across the audio and visual elements of Agitato. Morrison stretches into Mendelssohn’s composition as the work moves into its second act, with the intensity of the score now defined less by pace and pause and more by disjointed addition and subtraction of aural layers. As Morrison pushes harder, so does Lloyd. The depersonalisation of the dancers begins to crack. Their movements, which have always been chaotic but underpinned by a kind of abstracted coherence – with mirrored movements tending to feel coincidental – now occasionally become synchronised. Most noticeably, the dancers begin to acknowledge each other, their blank masks lifting. They even, sometimes, move in dialogue or become entangled. Sitting in the audience, this humanisation releases a tension I didn’t realise I’d been holding. The loneliness, the stress of freeze and frenzy, the chaos mediated by external control that dominated the work’s earlier parts is made manageable by the recognition of common experience. Even as the drama of the score and the dancers’ emotions deepen, the piece’s suspense lightens, shifting from unbearable and absurd to let in the light of playfulness and mutuality as the dancers move together.

'Agitato' (2026) by Jo Lloyd. Photo by Darren Gill.

Belatedly, I recognise that the silences that rang out loudly throughout Agitato's opening, which have all but disappeared by this third act, were not actually silent. When the music ceased, the quiet was actually textured with the distant sound of dancers in another room, a recording layered lightly into the score's gaps. In those quiet spaces, Lloyd and Morrison connected us with the ghosts of other artists. Present in the sound of unseen dancers' feet moving across the floor in rhythm – not always synchronised, but coherent in some way, like Lloyd and her castmates – is the spectre of Mendelssohn's composition and Morrison's reinterpretation of it, but also the work of so many other artists that have long woven in around the same ideas and forms. By extension there is also a different positioning of the audience – some of those who once listened or watched went on to think and to feel differently because of what they experienced. Others went on to make something coloured by what they saw and heard – the new expression holding inside of itself an echo of the old. In the soft scuffing of dancers' feet heard in the score's silences, Morrison and Lloyd point us toward a language of shared feeling that has developed gradually across tens of thousands of years of artistic exploration.



'Agitato' (2026) by Jo Lloyd. Photo by Darren Gill.

So, the agitation continues. From Mendelssohn in 1823 to Lloyd in 2026 and through so many restless bodies and minds before and in between – via, even (in a very minor way), my pre-show anxieties – and carried by the dancers on stage in Agitato. The stress of being alive rings as tinnitus in our ears. But the conversation continues too – the search to explore the feeling. Caught between the unbearable tension and the numbing slackness of existence there is a fibre weaving it all together; the recognition of the universality of this restlessness expressed through an ongoing artistic conversation unlimited by time. It forms a cushion of communal background noise on which we can all occasionally rest.



'Agitato' (2026) by Jo Lloyd. Photo by Darren Gill.

Agitato concludes with a single dancer in an arabesque, one hand reaching toward the floor. Just as the light goes down, their supporting knee bends and their hand meets the stage – the touch coinciding perfectly with the darkness descending. This resolved, comfortable instant after all the chaos makes it possible to clap, to rise from our seats, and to continue toward whatever existence holds for us next.



Farrin Foster is a writer, editor, and occasional film-maker. She is currently the founding editor of Splinter literary journal. Her writing has been published widely, including in The Guardian, Meanjin, Kill Your Darlings, and Cordite Poetry Review.

'Agitato' (2026) by Jo Lloyd. Photo by Darren Gill.