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# A Home Version of Trisha Brown's 'Roof Piece,' No Roof Required

Communication across distance is the essential component of this 1971 dance, Brown's company has found. You and your friends can try, too.



For “Roof Piece,” first performed in 1971, dancers scattered themselves across the roofs of SoHo and played a dance version of the game telephone. Peter Moore, Performance view of Trisha Brown’s “Roof Piece,” NYC, 1973/Barbara Moore/ARS, NY, via Paula Cooper Gallery

**By Brian Seibert**  
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This was supposed to be a big year for the Trisha Brown Dance Company, founded 50 years ago. In early March, the troupe flew to France to begin a sold-out anniversary tour. The first few shows went great. Then came the wave of coronavirus cancellations, and the dancers found themselves on the last American Airlines flight from Paris to New York.

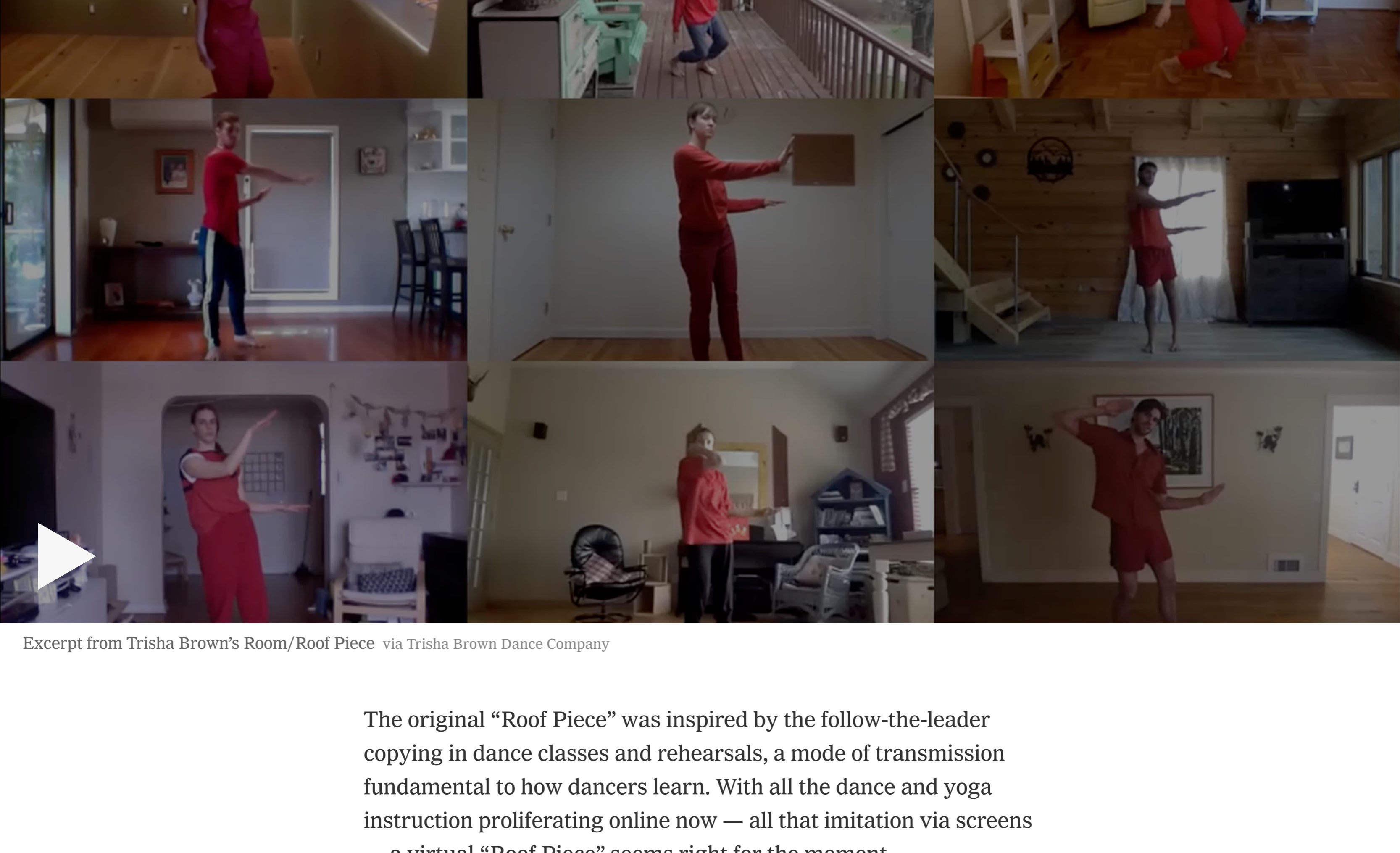
Scattered across the country — or in one case, back home in Australia — the dancers did what separated groups of every kind are doing: They met up virtually. They checked in on one another, commiserated about the canceled shows and started floating ideas about how they might continue to work remotely. One option quickly rose to the top: “Roof Piece.”

“Roof Piece” is a work that Brown, [who died in 2017](#), first performed in 1971. She and some colleagues scattered themselves across the water-tower-capped roofs of SoHo and played a dance version of the game telephone. One dancer executed a series of semaphore-like movements, which the dancer on the next roof over tried to copy exactly, and so on down the line.

Spectators, stationed atop buildings, could follow the transmission and the errors, the inevitable decay in the signal that Brown intended the exercise to expose. People who didn’t know what was going on might also take notice, and that was part of the plan, too. That’s why the dancers all wore red.

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Like many of [Brown’s early works](#) — for example, “[Man Walking Down the Side of a Building](#)” — “Roof Piece” is both simple and radical. Brainstorming about how to reproduce it virtually, the dancers immediately ran into a snag: Not everyone had access to a roof. So they decided that a roof wasn’t essential to the piece; communication across distances was.



Excerpt from Trisha Brown’s Room/Roof Piece via Trisha Brown Dance Company

The original “Roof Piece” was inspired by the follow-the-leader copying in dance classes and rehearsals, a mode of transmission fundamental to how dancers learn. With all the dance and yoga instruction proliferating online now — all that imitation via screens — a virtual “Roof Piece” seems right for the moment.

What’s more, as the company dancer Jamie Scott said, doing “Roof Piece” inside felt “like a nod of solidarity to people who are also confined.” So that’s what the troupe did, recording the result, now called “Room/Roof Piece,” and polishing it with some editing before posting the video on social media.

In another nod of solidarity, the company now encourages people at home to try their own virtual “Room/Roof Piece.”

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First, invite some friends to a meeting on a videoconferencing platform. (The dancers used Zoom.) Then choose the order of transmission: who is leader, who is No. 2, No. 3 and so on.

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The leader starts with a simple greeting, a wave of the hand. The rest of the motions are up to you, whatever you think “semaphore-like” means. (“Joint articulation and parallel and perpendicular lines,” Brown further specified.) A deep squat is the signal for the last person in line to take over as leader, reversing the flow. When that new leader wants it all to end, another squat is the sign.

Figuring out how to make this all work on Zoom took the Brown dancers some trial and error. In the rooftop version, everyone faces one direction, each copying the back of the person ahead. In the online version, everyone must face the screen. “We have to do the opposite of what we’re seeing for the transmission to look right,” the dancer Amanda Kmett’Pendry said.

The online version required some new choreography, so to speak. For the transmission to flow in sequence when viewers watch the dancers in a tile arrangement, the dancers have to turn on their cameras in the right order. For a dancer to see only the one person “in front,” each participant has to push a button at the right time. (On Zoom, this involves the “pin” function.)

The dancers tried hard to maintain the integrity of the original — they wear as much red as they had with them — but the online version is inevitably different, for participants and viewers.

A poster, with useful mapping, for a 1973 performance of “Roof Piece.” via Trisha Brown Archive

On rooftops, the distance between buildings, or obstructions like ledges, impair perfect mirroring. Online, it can be a briefly frozen signal, a difference in camera angle or maybe a naughty cat. Outside, a viewer can see only a part of the line and has to imagine that the signal started somewhere unseen or continues out of sight. Someone watching online can track the whole sequence, rather like a guard keeping an eye on isolated prisoners via a bank of surveillance cameras.

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Outside, “you really see the audience,” said Carolyn Lucas, the company’s associate artistic director. “They’re in close proximity, and they connect with the work so closely. But here we are in this place where, my god, there’s no close proximity. Yet there’s a determination to find a vehicle to counteract the distance.”

As Ms. Lucas noted, that determination is strongest among the dancers. “Even though the technology scares me a little, there’s this whole crew of younger dancers who are eager to figure out how to adapt.” It’s a situation common to many companies right now. As a steward of Brown’s legacy, Ms. Lucas welcomes the generational shift. The online versions “aren’t the same, but that’s OK,” she said, “The fun of Trisha’s work is that there’s always something to investigate and figure out.”

General “Roof Piece” guidelines still apply. “Keep moving even if you’re not sure what you’re seeing,” Ms. Kmett’Pendry advised. Simultaneously receiving and transmitting the message is the idea. “Don’t judge what you’re seeing. Make the best guess and pass that on.”

“You don’t have to be too fancy,” Ms. Lucas said. “You should feel really comfortable with the movement that comes out of you.”

The Brown dancers are expert practitioners in mimicry, who share a common style of supple yet articulate motion. But even with them, you can see how the same movement changes as it transfers from body to body, mind to mind.

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“Everybody’s idiosyncratic movement preference is going to be exposed in this, and that’s something people can celebrate,” Ms. Lucas said.

In the end, the videoconferencing “Roof Piece” is an exercise in how to communicate with people far away.

It’s about how Patrick McGrath in Santa Monica, Calif., can send a physical message through a digital image to eight fellow dancers who include Stuart Shugg in Australia and Jacob Storer in Richland Center, Wis. It’s about how Cecily Campbell, in Santa Fe, can see Mr. Storer move, and hear the birds near him, and indicate that she’s received Mr. McGrath’s round-the-world message by mimicking it and adding an appreciative smile.

*If you film yourself and your friends doing “Room/Roof Piece,” post a link to your video in the comments (Twitter or Instagram work best), or email a link to [thearts@nytimes.com](mailto:thearts@nytimes.com). Please make sure to adjust your privacy settings to make the link visible to people outside your network. We may include it in a follow-up article.*

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