

THE POLITICS OF METHOD
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Dance is political not because of its subject matter but because of the way dances are made, how they are structured, and what they show about people relating to each other. It is important to me to develop in the artistic process and to show in performance the PSYCHIC BOLDNESS of each dancer; to show people who are independent, strong, self-revealed and autonomous, yet deeply connected to and aware of each other. We want to have enlightened relationships -- between director and dancers, and among dancers.

My basic desire with dance has been that it be more like life: multi-layered, complex, sometimes interrupted, frequently ambiguous, filled with feeling, filled with thought, awkward at times, occasionally confused and even hesitant, showing attempts and failures as well as accomplishments. Traditionally in the West, dances have been made (and still are, for the most part) by choreographers who physicalize their inner life through movement, teach these "steps" to dancers, and then arrange them in geometric patterns which are constantly changing. The movements come out of the choreographer's consciousness. The structural concepts are often taken from an 18th-century, western, age-of-reason ideal of order and harmony. Even at best, when the movements have meaning, the effect has much to do with the patterns displayed by the bodies onstage and, to this extent, the work is similar both to lace and to military marching displays -- reassuring in its neat ordering of elements.

In the past twenty years, there have been changes happening in the dance world, diverse activities which have some things in common -- attempts to find ways to express the inner life of each dancer and not just of the choreographer; attempts to find ways to structure dancing in other than geometric patterns; attempts to reintegrate dance with daily and social life; bringing dance into the streets and public places; getting together and improvising with friends, as an alternative to taking class or rehearsing; performing improvisation onstage; engaging in collaborative processes that call upon the creativity, as well as skill and intelligence of each dancer. All these activities tend to reinforce psychic boldness, and attempt to rectify a situation that happens in dance possibly because of the nature of classroom training, in which the dancer becomes more and more divorced from the artist, and the process of the average dancer becomes less and less artistic and more and more craftsperson-like. Choreographers as diverse as Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton (in his development of the form known as "contact improvisation", which has changed the look of dance during the past twenty years), Merce Cunningham, Lisa Nelson, Ishmael Houston-Jones, Yvonne Meier, Jennifer Monson and many, many others have all been involved in this revolution. The way I see my place in all this is that I am discovering ways to choreograph -- to set dances with specific, repeatable movements and structures -- which give each dancer as creative and expressive a role as possible. But the work is still directed by one person -- me. And I am (usually) not performing improvisations. But I am also not teaching steps.

Since I started working, I have been searching for ways to make dances that express the power and totality of individuals and the sublime chaos of the universe. Dances that show, and involve in their creation, relationships between people that are more profound than imitation and the following of the boss's orders. I have always been more interested in watching the choreographer in a dance company than in watching the dancers. The choreographer dancing is moving in sync with her-or-himself. Watching the dancers is a little like watching a dubbed movie. Something doesn't quite sync up, externally and internally. This is so even though the dancers are usually better technicians (they can just concentrate on dancing rather than on the business of running a dance company). In my work, I want each dancer dancing to be as magical and captivating as a choreographer dancing movements that come from a lifetime of expression-through-movement, and the refining of that art.

I have also been working on making dance structures that relate to the specific nature of the movement itself, rather than to idealized notions about structuring technique. Instead of making perfect geometric shapes onstage, the dancers arrange themselves more the way people really do arrange themselves in life. We might learn the exact spatial patterns from a videotaped improvisation. Or we might put two or more solos together, coordinating spacing, rhythm, focus and timing in exact ways. We may be responding to the lines of force which other dancers are creating in space. And we are always incorporating accidents that happen in process back into the set choreography. I also frequently use "cinematic" structuring techniques: cuts, dissolves, having things go in and out of focus by letting other events pass in front and grab the attention. The effects of these techniques are actually more realistic than the kind of simplistic clarity we are accustomed to seeing onstage, because they operate in ways that are more like what our eyes really do when they see things.

Dance is a physicalization of ideas, emotions and spirit. Although our work is physical, our processes grow out of a need to re-integrate our bodies with our mental, emotional and spiritual selves. Performance has been a way of expressing ideas, values, emotions and unnamable things in a more complete way than is acceptable in everyday life. We work with purely physical elements, but we devise physical elements which closely correspond to states-of-being.

I am gradually becoming more aware of the political implications of the artistic process, and this has reinforced my commitment to working the way I do. Although my process arose from an aesthetic need to see interesting work, I began to realize that what made interesting work interesting was all the underlying values that go into making and performing the work. The overt "content" of a work is not really the content - not what affects an audience. The audience is responding to the HOW - the direct presence of the performance, its energy, its "feel". Especially with dance, as opposed to theater, a story is being told as soon as one or more persons move their bodies with respect to one another or their environment. Dance is such a metaphor that it has meaning - just as music has meaning - without overtly telling a story. Theater, because it is so involved with words, has, I believe, a different relationship to story. But even in theater that relies heavily on words for communication, there are many elements at work affecting the audience, other than the meaning of the words and the implications of the story. In a simple worst-case scenario: A performance has a "liberal" political message but is put together in a "conservative" way, e.g. everyone stands in a line and says the same thing at the same time with no indication of the magic and uniqueness of each individual. So really the message is nothing. The performance cancels itself out. Its message is "Don't exploit individuals," but the director exploits performers in making the work and manipulates humans into acting like puppets and being scenery. And that is what the audience will somehow sense, even though they may know nothing about performing, theater or dance.

Even if a performance has no overt and specific "content", but shows people behaving as full beings, and shows a world which is dense with nuance and possibility and depth, and varying possibilities for interpretation, then to me the performance is political. Its very existence weighs positively on the cosmic scale. And - the audience has an experience that energizes and excites them about their own creativity and the possibilities in their own lives. This is a performance that affects change - not because of its message, but because of its "feel". It affects the thoughts, feelings and lives of all those present.

Audiences participate in performances by perceiving them, and perceiving is an active sport. We all live in the same world and we all have different experiences. How one watches or experiences a performance is something that can vary wildly from person to person. Anyone in the business of making performances can either cultivate the art of perceiving or not. I believe that a performance-maker will do best by never underestimating the intelligence of the audience, always assuming that everyone out there is alive and intelligent, open-minded and creative, excited about life and aware of its depth and mystery. If the performance is open enough in its possibilities for interpretation, each perceiver can creatively free-associate, interpret, be stimulated, imagine or otherwise individually respond, while simultaneously experiencing some common thrust of meaning with the rest of the audience.

Rather than making work that blasts the audience with a theme that is impossible to misunderstand, I prefer to give them something that has the multi-facetedness and elusiveness of real life, and to invite them to use a little perceptual muscle in watching it. Several events may be going on simultaneously, related but not in an obvious way. The audience can't possibly see it all at once. Themes may be intertwined, rather than directly connected. What each one experiences is based on individual reactions and choices.

What I love as an audience member is to be at a performance of any kind that is in touch with the flow of ideas. Somehow the ideas are free and flowing. In the process of making the piece, the performers and director free-associated on a given structure within a shared context; natural responses that happened during the rehearsal process were incorporated into the score; ideas were continually added. So the performance becomes more like a meditation than an exposition, rich with facets and byways that have evolved organically over time. It is like a dream with its own rules of logic, inexplicable but inexorable. Watching this kind of work, I feel in touch myself with that fertile place. I feel possibilities rather than impossibilities. I have this response to the theater work of the Wooster Group, which has so much depth and multi-dimensionality that it tends to sharpen rather than flatten the perceptual powers of its audience.

In order to get to this kind of depth, the creating process may involve a great deal of free association on everyone's part. As the conceiver/director, I usually start out with some movement ideas that I have been playing with lately that seem to be fertile with potential, and that also seem to be metaphors for other non-movement themes or states-of-mind. (Lately, I have started to work with the sudden twitch-like movement the body does as it passes from waking to sleeping, while it is in that in-between state of freewheeling, indescribable flow of ideas, images and feelings. It can be called "movement with no preparation". Joan Skinner, creator of Skinner Releasing Technique, has simultaneously been working with the same idea in Seattle. She also speaks of "instant allowance, without going into some gear.") I bring these movement ideas into the studio, and see what happens when the dancers I am working with take off with them. At all points, I try to remain open to any interesting byway they may pursue. I also communicate to them, as fully as I am able, the intertwining, inter-related themes I am working with. These may spark ideas as well. At every point in the rehearsal process, I incorporate whatever of value comes up out of spontaneous association within the given "pond" of our context. The relationships between elements may not make sense in an obvious way, but they are real relationships. The result is a work that makes sense the way a dream makes sense - imbued with texture, or feeling, and seeming to have its own necessary and inscrutable rules of logic.

One of the basic modes that our company uses to make movement is a technique I call "flux". This is a way of improvising in which, rather than trying to follow through on the movement impulse, the job is to not follow through, but tune back into the body and go on to another impulse, then another, then another. Any kind of movement can follow any kind of movement - modern, classical, pedestrian, gestural, isolated, whole-body. One movement can comment on another. Any movement is okay; we don't censor any movement impulses. It's okay even to do all the things you usually do in improvisation that you are sick of doing. Somehow, by getting interrupted, they change. This is a physical analog to "stream-of-consciousness" in thinking and writing. The dancer is not thinking, but watching her or him move is like reading somebody's thoughts; it is kinetic thinking. It is akin to meditation - very aware but non-focused, non-goal-oriented. Many different layers come up, resulting in a non-linear structure in the movement itself. Although this can seem like non sequitur, I call it a different kind of continuity.

There are several interesting aspects of this movement mode. It is very much like meditation, and nothing like concentration. Because it frees you from having to follow through on the consequences of your actions, it opens up possibilities that might otherwise remain submerged. If the body's physical impulses were akin to channels being received by a TV tuner, it would mean that you constantly switch channels, and somehow this opens up new frequencies: you can tune into channels that are deeper down, or more remote from your everyday viewing habits. The very transition from one channel to another creates interesting transitional movements of seemingly unconnectable activities, which result in a true-yet-unfamiliar state-of-body. This is when people start seeming inexorably themselves, with a power and conviction and totality of concentration

that goes miles beyond "showing what you can do". I have used this technique in teaching all levels of students - from people with no dance experience to professional dancers, and with very few exceptions the technique is amazingly easy to do. When I first describe it, they think, "Oh no, I don't think I can do it - it sounds too complicated," but as soon as I say "Go," magic happens. Everyone is themselves, expressing their inner lives through movement, not thinking, not planning, not judging, just being; acting purely on physical impulse, but each movement filled with inner life and meaning.

I am quite sure that this way of moving changes brain waves. It is a whole way of being, and very different from the preferred everyday way of being in our society. It involves an acute heightening of the senses, a vastly increased awareness of other people and the environment, an acceptance of yourself and whatever you happen to be doing at the moment, and a total lack of concern for results. It involves a certain comfort with not knowing what you are doing or what is going to happen next. And the irony is - it looks virtuosic!

In much of Cranky Destroyers, we used a movement image that I borrowed from one of Joan Skinner's releasing classes - "limbs of fury". I interpret "fury" the old way, as fire, passion, power. We imagined we were standing on top of a mountain, with a vast sky all around us, and energy passing through our limbs like volts of electricity. The movement would just send energy out into space, like vectors of force, of varying qualities and directions. People became like gods and goddesses creating the world, or prophets and prophetesses speaking in unknown tongues. The choice of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony started out as a year-long joke. The whole previous year, while on tour, we joked about dancing to Beethoven. Our movement style is considered so eccentric, and our soundtracks usually so unconventional, that we could easily get hilarious about "The Beethoven Piece". After a year of this, I figured we should really do it because it was already a reality for us. The juxtaposition of highly contemporary, outlandish-by-most-standards movement with a more-than-well-known classical music score was more than just humor-through-incongruity. Beethoven, in his time, went against all traditional notions of structure. He was accused by critics of his day of being very inventive but having no sense of structure, and his symphonies were said to meander, need editing, and be twice as long as necessary. So I felt that we had a lot in common. Also, the fifth symphony seemed to me to be very idealistic in tone. It seems to say that human society is composed of great individuals moving forward together. It thinks highly of essential human nature. And so do I.