Talking and Dancing in the 21st Century

By Leslie Satin

In 1962, Yvonne Rainer dropped a big pouf of white tulle on the floor, tossed her dark raincoat on top of it, then threw herself onto the pile and screamed. For the several minutes which comprised the third and last section of her "Three Seascapes," she kept on screaming, all the while rolling back and forth, legs in the air, body tangled in tulle, until she finally came to a stop and stood, breathing heavily, until the lights went out.

At least that's how we've read about it all these years. And indeed, when Patricia Hoffbauer—the (Brazilian-born) dancer to whom Rainer taught the piece—danced it September 30, 2002 at Judson Memorial Church in New York City, where Rainer had shown it January 29, 1963 at the Judson Dance Theater's Concert of Dance #2,[1] that is what happened. Part three, the screaming section, constituted a "perfect fit" after the less well known first and second parts. Part one was a calm running demarcation of a square interrupted irregularly by falls and accompanied by a section of Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No.2. Part two was a slow sultry walk on a long diagonal, hips and arms twisting, jutting, and spiraling, set to La Monte Young's *Poem for Tables, Chairs, Benches*.

At this same concert, Yvonne Meier and Ishmael Houston-Jones performed their new "Deconstruction," a hilarious, messy collaboration. Meier, a robust white woman in red dress, apron, and combat boots, strode around telling what seemed to be stories about herself as a child ("seemed to" because her unmiked voice and the acoustics were inadequate to each other). Houston-Jones, a black man who started out elegant in suit, tie, and shoes, first dumped big bags of potting soil onto the stage, then performed Meier's "character," finishing up nude except for a belt dangling plastic bags of walnuts and the quantities of soil he energetically rubbed into his hair and face.

These two dances bookended[2] an evening of works celebrating the fortieth anniversary of the Judson Dance Theater, the cornerstone of postmodern dance; the twenty-fifth anniversary of Movement Research, the premier

organization continuing and developing that exploratory tradition; the eleventh year of Movement Research's partnership with Judson Church; and Judson Church itself, venerated for its joint commitments to artistic innovation and social justice. The evening was compelling and provocative for a number of reasons, but one strikes me as particularly timely.

It boils down to the *Seascapes* scream. Though I was completely engaged by it in the moment of its utterance, I find myself stuck as to its meaning—not *what* it meant, in the sense of what it was about, but simply what it means to scream. On the one hand, it seems, screaming is a pure bodily act, whether it is a matter of being beyond words, as when a circumstance is too potent to be encompassed by language, or before them, in the sense of the Lacanian Semiotic, or, more simply, of the infantile. On the other hand, screaming suggests speech at its most radical, its most powerful, a kind of vocalization at the outer limits of its technical and expressive possibilities.

A recent scientific study concluded that infants' efforts to speak begin significantly earlier than we have thought so far. Babbling babies, videotapes show, open their mouths wider on the right side than the left, indicating the link of their "da da da" to the left side of the brain, which, we understand, controls not only the right side of the body but also language. To researcher Laura Ann Petitto, this "left-side lateralization" demonstrates that babbling is a "fundamentally linguistic activity," a perspective supporting Chomsky's theory that humans have an innate ability to use language. It also, interestingly, shifts the locus of speech from the auditory to the visual, to the (subliminally) visible bodily gesture. This, too, recalls Chomsky's theory, which encompassed non-vocal forms such as signing, which corporealizes language; and it imagines a biological baseline joining language and movement. I don't mean to sound reductive here, to subsume speech into dance. Nonetheless, in the context of a reflection on the continuing force that speaking exerts in the so-called silent world of dance, the image of the tiny talker is resonant.

(Moments before the start of a recent solo dance concert, a well-known choreographer and writer in the audience was overheard to say, "I hope she isn't going to talk. I especially hope she isn't going to talk about herself.")

To some degree, the citation of the scream is a circumstance of nomenclature and definition, of context. When Rainer first pitched her fit, it might reasonably have been understood as an extension of the ways that she and her colleagues at Judson were rethinking the question of what dance is or could be. That is to say, three episodes of material with no apparent narrative or dramatic thread, each consisting of sound and movement, each complete unto itself, might be simply accumulated into a dance. Moreover, not only could running in a square and falling down and standing up (all with both hands in the runner's coat pockets, I might add—no mean feat of physical virtuosity) or traveling really slowly and faintly awkwardly in an unbroken chain of repeated actions be considered dancing; but making a lot of noise could itself also be considered dancing. And perhaps, in a nod to the sense of "meaning" as "what it's about," the screaming could have been understood as a commentary on the state of the art, or its definitions, as they had inhibited the development of choreography.

Though many years have passed since the glory days of the Judson, contemporary choreographers—certainly those whose work we define, loosely, as experimental—are still investigating what dance can be made of, what it can be and do, and they are still bringing speech and language into their dances. Of course many choreographers and dancers never use language in their work; the dashed phrase in the preceding sentence casually marks the exclusion from this discussion of those artists whose work, embedded in multiple histories and traditions of dance-making, speaks in the poignant and powerful wordless language of time and space. There are still potential avenues for shock in this realm: imagine a dancer in a Romantic ballet (the site, still, of elaborate miming, the gesture-speech we accept in Western narrative concert dance) or even in a Balanchine abstraction (its Romantic protocol quieted to pure-movement design) proposing aloud, "Excuse me, Princess, would you like to join me for a spin around the floor?" or, perhaps, a bodiless voiceover advising spectators to "view

the pas de deux onstage as a representation of the heterosexual imperative in Western culture, as manifested in details of staging, costume, structure, and the movement vocabulary itself." For reasons as vast as the history of ballet, these scenes are unlikely to transpire with regularity any time soon.

But there are many choreographers who find that language is integral to their work. Of course language in the sense of literary inspiration has always played a critical role in generating dances (including those nineteenth-century story ballets). Here, though, we're contemplating those choreographers who bring language into the performance itself, through various compositional strategies evolving from multiple aesthetic perspectives.

(For several years, I have begun each new choreographic project by writing a text, a script. I recently bemoaned the difficulty I was having with a piece that I had started working on by moving; I couldn't find a place in it for talking. "You know, Leslie," said my friend—also a choreographer—after a pause, "not every dance has a text.")

Generally, the mode is vocal: the spoken text. The talking functions as live or taped accompaniment to dancing, its relationship to the movement existing along a range from the illustrative to the correlative to the oblique to the remote. That is, what the dancer does acts out what is spoken, is literally a doubling of the text, or it moves along points of a continuum, becoming less and less indexically linked to its accompaniment.

The illustrative relationship, typically, is the least daring possibility, the one most linked to tired conventions of theater or "interpretive dance" or even the *tableaux vivants* and *plastiques* of Delsarte performances. But it also has both parodic and para-narrative possibilities, as in the Meier/Houston-Jones collaboration. Everything about the presentation of the piece, from the spectators' familiarity with these performers as active participants in alternative traditions of choreography; to the joint thoroughness and wryness with which every aspect of the piece (the full-out "dancey" parts, the detailed recounting of the tales and the instructions, the functional quality of the strip) was executed; to the sly

representations of race, sex, and gender contributed to its framing as something more than/something less than/anything but “straight” narrative coherence.

Moving down the line of dislocations, the distance from one mode of meaning-making to another increases. (This is a reverse parallel to the path Rainer took, with sound rather than words, in ”Three Seascapes”: the plainness of running against the gorgeousness of the music, the sexy curves counterposed to the exaggerated scraping sounds of furniture and floor, the yelling and rolling an integrated unit.) We may understand the locutions of the dancer as she describes a character, but recognize that she is not playing that character; perhaps no one is playing that character; perhaps there are no characters at all. We may see in her action, or someone else’s, only the abstracted trace of something referred to in the text, or we may see it at another moment, when the words have wrapped themselves around another image or have returned the stage to silence. We may find only non-literal links, or no link at all, between the text and the movement; the words, whether in a language we understand or one we do not, might function primarily as sound, as rhythm, as texture, as structural signposts that variously, but non-literally, co-exist with the dance itself. We may comprehend in the spoken words a commentary on the piece, a working through or an articulation or even a refutation of the ideas that reside in the dance’s origins or weave through its phrases.

Other choreographers present textual material as a visual element, slides or video images projected onto walls, bodies, or other surfaces. Their words, regardless of their literal meaning, proclaim themselves as outside the dance, exegetical, even as they interact with the other components of the piece. Like the spoken texts, they may play out a full range of relationships to the movement. They are both burdened and privileged with the presumption of certain obvious roles: as caption, choreographer’s mouthpiece, and/or ironic counterpoint.

And many artists, through these strategies and others, merge text and dance into a variety of multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary forms, such as dance theater and performance art and multimedia. This is not a new development. The crossing of genre-tracing boundaries has been central to the

arc of Western avant-garde performance since the late nineteenth century; think of Wagner's *gesamtkunstwerk*. In 1962, though, when the Judson Dance Theater began, the interaction among art forms put the spotlight on dance, an unusual circumstance for the form more accustomed to the status of the poor relation. But we digress. The point here is the still-potent coupling of dance and text. In fact, the integration of speech and language with movement has become so common to post-modern dance practice that it can come as a surprise to encounter a dance that doesn't "talk." And, I confess, when I do find such a dance, I sometimes find the whole affair oddly old-fashioned, quaint. Why, I wonder, is everyone pretending to be mute?

Of course, I'm exaggerating, but not entirely. I am immersed professionally and personally in dance, and I continue to love the form. Both as a practitioner and a spectator, I love that it offers opportunities for contemplation and for sweat. I love that it sends me outside everyday consciousness at the same time it grounds me in the undeniable immediacy and specificity of this body, this place, this moment. I love its virtuosic spectacles and its intimate minutiae. I love its ravishing embodiments of speed and voluptuous raptures of slowness. And yes I said yes I will Yes I love to write about dance, to fly across keyboards and into dictionaries and through my own excited brain cells to find the *mots justes,* the words that will make a dance I saw, or even one I haven't, have another life. But of course, it can't have the *same* life. When I saw "Three Seascapes" for the first time a few weeks ago, I recognized it from the descriptions I had read, the choreographer's own and those of reviewers. The words I had read had given me an outline, and now I had a real-time, real-person, hair-in-Hoffbauer's-face performance. And now, again, I have words to resume the conversation, to tempt you, the reader, into the world of the dance.

That's the thing. Words and action, language and dance, are not always entirely separate for people who love them both, who find that working across forms is a matter of finding what works best to articulate an idea or an image or a sensation. Talking and dancing can't replace each other, but they can embrace and they can fight like cats, and that energy is crucial to keeping choreography

vivid, to finding new experiences of kinetic and emotional alertness, intellectual exhilaration and sensual pleasure, intensity and beauty.

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[1] The dance was first performed March 5, 1962 at the Maidman Playhouse in New York City. Patricia Hoffbauer also performed the piece at Martha @ the Pillow, Jacob's Pillow, August 8-11, 2002.

[2] Actually, the evening's program began with Cathy Weis's pre-concert dance and video "warm-up" piece.

Bibliography

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