Dialogues: Thinking Through Dance

The Legs of the Theorist[1]

There's a terrific exhibit this fall at the Metropolitan Museum of Art called "La Divine Comtesse," a collection of nineteenth-century photographic portraits of the Countess de Castiglione—a wealthy woman-about-Paris and sometime mistress of Napoleon—shot by Pierre-Louis Pierson but staged by the subject herself.[2] A document spanning over forty years of self-creation and self-representation,[3] the photographs (some of which are so richly painted over that they seem to morph from one genre into another) depict the Countess as *femme fatale*, tragic heroine, and crone; fetishistically isolate her legs and feet; present her (male) child and her (dead) dog as, respectively, her feminized and deceased extensions; and reduce her and her project to a single, forward-facing eye.

Fascinating as art, autobiography, and gender play, these photographs constitute a parade of personae, one woman's Second Empire-into-Third Republic production of her own legend. They beckon from elaborately set-up studios of a century gone by, through their voluptuous use of line and tone, the unblinking gaze of their central figure, and the sheer overload of insistently-present-but-teasingly-absent images of her face and her body. From long-ago laboratories of image-making and spectatorship, they presage many of our contemporary critical, theoretical, and aesthetic preoccupations; and they remind us that looking, and in particular looking at women, is matrixed into our ever-changing circumstances of perceiving and theorizing.

This brings me, obliquely, to looking at dance, with an eye turned to gender. Ann Daly's recent tripartite meditation on dance scholarship and feminist theory at the turn of the millennium (*DRJ* summer 2000) is a compelling reconsideration of the pathways down which we who are so preoccupied have traveled—danced, as it were—for the last fifteen-or-so years. Daly makes a number of valuable observations about her own route and its intersections with others across the scholarly map. "No question, framework, or theory ever remains fixed," she writes in Part I, using her own trio of works on dance and theory (two essays and a keynote speech) to demonstrate the appropriately limited shelf-life of critical perspectives that mingle with other voices, within and across forms and disciplines, over time, and to insist on both "theoretical analysis and close reading" as integrated elements of responsible critical spectatorship. Part II traces Daly's own journeys through theory: her initial pleasure in its ludic and seductive garden; her frustration and discomfort with current theoretical *writing* that bloodlessly and boringly addresses only its own devotées; and the pleasure she has found, instead, in the realm of poetics and in the *movement*, the fluidity, of thinking in terms of changing relationships and positions—dancing, as it were. And in Part III, Daly reflects on two pieces she wrote, separated by thirteen years, on Pina Bausch. The different points of view of these essays, she shows, reflect at once the individual development of her ways of seeing and the collective development of a community of thoughtful viewers. And finally, Daly writes, we need to rethink dance, or looking at it, in terms that go far beyond the traditions of theoretical and critical discourse, to the long-forbidden areas of emotion, and of beauty.

This is juicy stuff for those of us who love to look and who find those elements Daly attributes to theory ("puzzle-like logic," "intense, even erotic, form of play") in critical response, too. But it's juicy, also, for those of us who dance. As a dancer and choreog-

rapher as well as a writer, I feel the urgency of bringing the experience of the dancer, of the dancing body, to the mix. That desire to bring dance and theory, especially feminist theory, into conversation with each other has driven much of the work I've done, at least since coming to academia. For me, this isn't academic; it's personal.

Contemplating the exclusion of emotion from the realm of criticism, Daly revisits as well the longstanding and beleaguered battle between formalism and feminism, acknowledging that critics in neither camp have known what to do with it. The battle is broader, really, encompassing theories other than feminism and artistic perspectives as well as scholarly ones. Back in 1974, Allan Kaprow, in a piece called "Formalism: Flogging a Dead Horse," demonstrated the general entwinement of formalist and anti-formalist concerns, concluding nonetheless that (as Daly warns about current theory) formalism "posits a self-sufficient, closed universe [that] talks to no one but its own" (162). In any event, since I came of age as a dancer and a feminist at more or less the same time, the battle is loaded. I first studied choreography in a post-Judson pedagogical climate that had long washed its hands of traditional modern dance expression/ism and that delighted in the mathematical manipulation of dance's raw materials, particularly through the potentially less-habitual-than-instinctual choreographic apparatus of chance operations. My mentor, Jimmy Waring, was by no means a formalist choreographer; his own reputation rests largely on his eccentric and poetic revisions of vaudeville and variety dance. But in class—where Jimmy accepted *anything* as dance as long as we proved thoughtful intention—we diligently carried out the logic-challenging dictates of chance charts; graphed the technical manipulations of movement; and choreographed rather than "acted" every facial tic. As for academic feminism, I first discovered the radical/separatist/Marxist perspectives of the late 1960s and early 1970s and then all the waves and the other theories that followed. And for years, I have tried to find ways to dance and to watch dance that haven't left a piece of me uncomfortable, or out.

For much of the time, my option has been silence. I'm not referring to the state of vividness behind the quiet to which John Cage drew our attention years ago but to the default mode of not speaking across camps. That is, among dance friends and colleagues, I have looked, largely, at movement and *mise-en-scène;* we don't typically approach work in terms of theory. And in those academic settings not linked to performance, I haven't expected anyone to know about dance. Some of this is merely the particularity of shop talk or jargon: the specific discourses of the disciplines we live in. But some of it is bigger, more potent. One painful circumstance, in graduate school, emerged from an attempt to cross lines. It was a longstanding disagreement with fellow students, including dancers, whose choreographic politics seemed to turn theory into a movement manual. In particular, they believed that stillness on stage was representationally dangerous for a female dancer, pinioning her not only spatially but theoretically, identifying her as quarry to be captured and reduced. I thought then (and still do; I don't know their current views) that this was wrongheaded, an aesthetic misunderstanding of words that invited one kind of pleasure (Daly's puzzles) but showed no inclination to get sweaty. Everything I believed about art took its fullest form in those moments when all there was was stillness, silence, the essence of everything vital. I still believe that.

Frankly, it's getting better; the lines of demarcation are blurring. Daly articulates

the process of expansion through which criticism and theory have incorporated not only movement analysis but the complex web of cultural and personal experiences and signifiers. The world of dance scholarship is broadened, its probings of dance more inclusive and more incisive. And as feminist theory and performance theory become more widely familiar, my non-dance colleagues are increasingly interested in dance as a significant site of cultural expression, what Daly refers to as "dance-as-witness."

More crucially, there are now plenty of dancers and choreographers who can wrestle in eely pools of theory as brilliantly as Derrida or de Lauretis or any of those writers whose words I love but who I'd bet wouldn't dream of putting an actual non-metaphorical toe into a dance studio. And these dancers do their wrestling in the dances themselves, in movement and other aspects of performance, as well as in conversations, panel discussions, and the printed word. Interestingly, this interaction, though it has historical precedents across the arts, has been more critical in the development of twentieth-century visual art than in the growth of dance. But it is fundamental to the recent history of experimental dance, with its integration of intellectual elements in the dance and writing of individual choreographers like Kenneth King, Yvonne Rainer, and Marjorie Gamso, to name a few, and of collective efforts like the Judson Dance Theater and Movement Research. The conversation is advanced by those choreographers who take the critical ball into their own courts, assertively publishing responses to written accounts of their work and initiating debate on their own. It is continued in pedagogy, in artist/scholars' laboratories where students make dance, read its histories and theories, draw on their professors' cross-disciplinary models, and, ideally, contribute to the development of the field.

Finally, even in the daily work of the dance class and rehearsal, as we lie on our backs or launch ourselves through the air, we are informed by our own wisdom. In some instances, dancers have read the feminist or literary or queer theory, and often they are knowledgeable about philosophies of the interplay of mind and body. But as movers and spectators, we always know–as a process–how movement makes meaning in ways that are beyond language. I don't know if "the wisdom of the body," as a phrase, is too breathless for academia, but I know that I believe in it and that I don't see that belief as signaling–as has been suggested by dance training that directs dancers to stop thinking–the exclusion of intellect.

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One thing about dancing with Jimmy Waring is that I learned to take beauty seriously. Jimmy cared deeply about beauty and its place in art, but he wasn't caught up in its conventions; whatever else beauty meant in his work, it never meant mere decoration. Acutely attuned to the details of a pose or action, he hammered at a dancer until the shape was right, but he created such utterly odd, absurd, *beautiful* shapes and actions to perfect. One part of his legacy is the delight in finding beauty unexpectedly. I don't know whether he read theory—he read us philosophy, art, religion, and poetry—but I can imagine him finding beauty in it one day and sneering the next that it was like pinning jelly to the wall.

Approaching the end of her essay, Daly claims that in tossing "beauty" from the terms of critical discourse, we suffered a loss, a loss now being recuperated in the acts of both artists and theorists. "The terms of post-structuralist analysis are inverting," she writes: "From death to ecstasy. Oppression to utopia. Pain to beauty." These words are, if you will, beautiful, a heartening sugges-

tion of what art might offer practitioners and viewers. I'm struck, though, by the lingering traces of binary structure. I don't doubt Daly's belief in the potential for these qualities to overlap. But I doubt the completeness with which language covers the territory; I worry about it in the sense of anxiety and in the sense of worrying your fingers in a tough moment, words and skin rubbing up against each other like a dancer gripping the floor with her foot. The signature phrases of the founders of modern dance—the Arc between the Two Deaths, Contraction and Release, Fall and Recovery—captured their belief in the body's expression lying in the dance between one pole and another. To me, it's simpler, or maybe grander. I believe that the dancing body can cut through those binaries, finding death *and* ecstasy or oppression *and* utopia or pain *and* beauty—I'm talking about metaphor, not emotional expression and mimesis—just as it can locate for both practitioners and viewers the pleasure of movement and its interactions of the cellular and the worldly.

The Countess lived exuberantly in multiple worlds: the upper-class Continental society into which she married, her extravagant imagination, and her enormous scrapbook of self-portraiture. Long dead, she survives as a series of ornately framed images in which she confronts conventions of photographic representation. Looking us in the living eye, in some instances thickening the plot by gazing into her own mirror or displaying only a disembodied foot, she snaps the shutter of her own camera. *Click*! Now *we* have been framed, caught, looking for truths in dusty pictures just as we look for them in dancing bodies, trace our analyses and revelations in outpourings of words on pages, feed our desires with each other's verbal profferings.

What could the Countess, who left behind written reflections but no theories through which to read her pictoral self-representation,[4] have been thinking as Pierre-Louis Pierson snapped her picture? That is, how did she see herself? What was Pierson thinking, for that matter? Did he see him*self* as the creator of her images? How does the artifact of a moment shift as our experience of seeing changes across the years? How do these questions matter to the theorist's passion to look beyond the visible? How can the artist contribute to the theorist's looking and seeing, and how can she carry the written words into her choreography? Daly writes that theory "is successful insofar as it is generative." In the best of all possible worlds, it can generate theory and it can generate dance, and dance can do the same. We have only to keep our eyes open.

–Leslie Satin

Leslie Satin is a choreographer/dancer, writer, and teacher who lives and works in New York City. Her latest choreographic project is a series of dances about travel called "Foreign Currencies"; the text for the first of these pieces, "C'est-à-dire," will appear in a forthcoming issue of *Performing Arts Journal*. Satin has a Ph.D. in Performance Studies from New York University. She teaches at NYU and SUNY/Empire State College.

Notes

1. The title of this piece plays on the name of Abigail Solomon-Godeau's essay, "The Legs of the Countess" (*October* 39, winter 1986: 65-108). Linking the photographs of the Countess de Castiglione to the ideology of ballet and the conventions of photography, Solomon-Godeau examines the construction of femininity in nineteenth-century Europe.

2. The photographer is also known as Louis Pierson.

3. Many of the photographs were made in the 1850s and 1860s, when the Countess was a young woman; another group focuses on her last years (she died in 1899).

4. Solomon-Godeau cites lines from the Countess's journal, recalling her own extraordinary beauty and referring to herself as "a work" (69).

Works Cited

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