

Michael
M.I.C.

- MUSIC - BACH - duo

- 3/4 mins

- BLACK TABLE CLOTH

maria knock @ window

alison stevens @ helen

TEA

MAKE
EXTENSION
PHRASE X 3 AB together
X 3 ^AB
_BA

LOOK
K →
O O
L →

m walks
L walks, turns - closes window.

DANCING BEYOND WORDS

MARY KATE CONNOLLY

ESTRAGON:

Perhaps he could dance first and think afterwards, if it isn't too much to ask him.

VLADIMIR:

[to Pozzo]. Would that be possible?

POZZO:

By all means, nothing simpler. It's the natural order.

He laughs briefly.

VLADIMIR:

Then let him dance.

[Act 1, *Waiting for Godot*, Samuel Beckett, 1953]

It is unlikely that Samuel Beckett's Pozzo had in mind the choreographic devising process when dispensing the above pronouncement. This notion of dance however, as impulse, as corporeally governed display beyond thought, is at first glance, a somewhat pleasing one. If we are to follow Pozzo's viewpoint, we might consider dance as being *before* or *beyond* thought; untethered to weighty rumination. And within this framework, it becomes possible to replace the word 'Think' with 'Write'. The impulsive body followed by the ruminating, reflective mind, and the written text. Now whilst this tenet may already seem problematic for a number of reasons, it is nonetheless often the order which is followed within traditional critical models, where writing comes only after the performed event, and where frequently, the writer is not the dancer/maker and vice versa. Within this model, rumination naturally takes hold, bringing with it a number of other characteristics which forge the shape and function of the text. And so the 5-star/raspberry award style of review is born, the breathless column inches of impassioned critics seeking to champion the artform in the face of an apathetic public, and the skilled swordplay of academia, where dance duels with philosophy, sociology, anthropology.

Whilst in no way seeking to undermine the worth of these forms of writing, it is perhaps little surprise that in the face of these traditionally imposed constraints, writing/dancing practitioners have long begun to excavate the ways in which dance and text can exist, interrelate, cross-fertilize, generate, and archive. It seems we have a predilection to make text and dance co-habit which could be viewed both as a match made in heaven, and as an altogether difficult coupling. Dance and text are not the same – they have different weights, depths, textures. They are 'inhabited' differently by the viewer. By persisting in marrying the two, do we risk both artforms coming off worse from the encounter?

This essay seeks to provide a brief survey of some writing/dancing dancing/writing strategies at work in current practice, and in doing so attempts to query why it is these two artforms continue to find one another. Why do we insist on writing on, around, from, and about, dance? What is at stake in these explorations, and is this the road to a happy marriage?

Text as Archive/On Avoiding Decomposition

There is something about the weight of text which evokes in the writer a compulsion towards the archival. Text...feels...**heavy-and-permanent**. Posterity beckons. Text can bamboozle and dazzle the reader with speed. Or punctuate with a Pregnant...Pause. But despite the merry dance executed amid the tac-tac-tac of the computer keyboard, or the scratching of the pen as it scribbles, there is nonetheless a sense of permanence and 'object' to the finished product. ~~There is evidence of what went before.~~

Dance on the other hand is weightless (in the sense of posterity), shackled not to the linear, or the indelible. Once embodied, nothing remains of its original form. In a discussion on what it might mean to 'write with dance', André Lepecki journeys back to describe the dilemmas faced by iconic ballet and writing pioneers such as Jean Georges-Noverre, who (according to Lepecki), cultivated an early understanding of dance as 'elusive presence...fleeting trace of an always irretrievable, never fully translatable motion: neither into notation, nor into writing.'ⁱⁱ In charting the relationships between text and dance, Lepecki suggests that 'movement is both sign and symptom that all presence is haunted by disappearance and absence'ⁱⁱⁱ. Indeed there is an inherent sense of loss as dance, perpetually in flux, authors itself within an impermanent, unstable medium. In writing on dance after the performed event, there is an element of eulogising, describing, and documenting which takes place. Perhaps within these strategies, an attempt at resuscitation is to be found. This reviving is of course an attempt at the impossible: recapturing the elusive through the permanent will never succeed. Dissection and eulogy only occur when something is already dead. The dance has gone and the writer attempts to fill the void with words which re-author the past performance in a new and different medium.

It goes without saying that dance texts do serve as fascinating archival tools. It is interesting to consider that the earliest ballets have solely text-based archives, which often have little to do with the choreography itself. The traces left behind might instead comprise of sardonic reviews by critics such as Théophile Gautier, laced with social gossip and value judgements of the era, costume notes and libretto, overwrought love notes sent to ballerinas in an attempt to woo, the assiduous directions of early dancing masters, written for the edification of their pupils in fusty tomes.

In writing on dance after the event, there are also a number of economic and social gains to be made; dance is disseminated, publicised, and therefore kept alive in public consciousness and debate. A validation of sorts is perpetuated in column inches, academic discourse, and blogs. Sadly however these archival remnants do not aid in the central struggle against loss. In charting the surrounding elements of performance, and replacing the live event with cumbersome metaphor, further distancing occurs, and as the gap widens, dance's decomposition (in the sense of liveness), is established. An attempt at translation between mediums is perhaps bound to fail, when dance does not yield to the rules of language in the moment of afterthought.

Writing Before the Dancing

But what if the order were to be reversed? Text as generative tool, rather than archival one. Many artists use text as a way into dance, rather than the other way around. The work of choreographers Emma Fitzgerald and Áine Stapleton is just one example of how text-based scores can be utilised to investigate the boundaries between writing and dancing, expanding the definitions of both in doing so.

Fitzgerald & Stapleton state that 'The company's choreographic process is rooted in the use of language to animate and direct the performer's experience on stage and to celebrate the virtuosity of the body's ability to perceive itself in relation to the unique and immediate physical and choreographic environments of each performance'.^{iv} Within this working practice, text expands the notion of language choreographically; the body is spurred and moulded by the text. One could argue that it is authored by the text but perhaps in a 'backstage' sense. Text rather than embodiment comes first, so in a sense there is a notion of linearity to begin with, which then arcs and curves as it finds a resting place within the moving body. This is text written with the body in mind, an eye or a limb cast towards the physical structure that it may become.

In the case of work such as Legitimate Bodies' 2009 production *Hanging in There*, a humorous duet which riffs on the political wordplay bandied about during the time of the Good Friday Agreement, an alternate approach is favoured. In this meeting of two worlds, there is a sense that the physical iterations of the spoken text illuminate with greater clarity the absurdity and the sense of precariousness which hovers within the trite politico-speak and bluff. Here the text, already in existence and written in an utterly different context, is subject to the will of the movement, which dislocates and rewrites it in a quirky guise.

The spoken word is a regular feature of Irish contemporary dance; from 'movement speeches' such as those in *Hanging in There*, or Irish Modern Dance Theatre's loquacious duet *Actions* (2010), to the sparse single phrase 'catch me' uttered mid-flight by the dancers in Fearghus Ó'Conchúir's *Tabernacle* (2011). As text resides more and more prevalently in contemporary dance performance, it is worthwhile considering the divergent textures which it inserts within the space of dance. With the speaking body comes a particular kind of signification and decoding. There is all at once the suggestion of narrative, and attendant expectations of 'reading' and deciphering. It is here that perhaps Ireland's esteemed literary heritage can unwittingly disadvantage the world of the fleeting and intangible. Are we, as viewers within this canon, conditioned to seek the narrative, the decipherable in the dance? In the case of Beckett's Vladimir, Estragon, and Pozzo, they are no friends of decipherability. They evade deconstruction, invite familiarity without linearity, and lead the viewer along winding tracks to a place of non-sense. And yet there is text, a speaking body; for the viewer perhaps this offers a sense of knowing, an ability to offer judgement. They are after all speaking in the same 'language'. If we apply this quest for story and narrative when we experience dance, are we lost before we begin?

Within this conundrum, the opposing weights of dancing and writing are once again in evidence. There is a reciprocal authorship between text and movement, and a careful balancing act must be negotiated to avoid one smothering the other. A particular craft is evident in works which traverse along these lines and allow both dance and text to thrive. The literal physical metaphors in the counterbalances and bodily knots of *Hanging in There* serve to make the text *dance*, providing a physical architecture to otherwise solely conceptual language. In the case of Ó'Conchúir's 'catch me' phrase, playful physical falls and swoops are rendered immediately vulnerable by this single utterance, in a way that perhaps only the spoken word can facilitate. With each new encounter between dance and text it seems the battle lines must be re-drawn, the weight of words tested anew.

Dancing Writing

In the same way as the presence of text can sculpt dance, so too can the relationship be reversed. Jeffrey Gormly writing in his essay on solo practice outlines a state of dance as 'a state of mind/body/mind that is in love with movement'.^v In embracing a state of dance in writing, there is the capacity for side-stepping, for recourse to the immersive and embodied; writing becomes [almost] loosed from the linear.

This state of dance as a construct in dialogue and writing is undoubtedly a fruitful one. The concept has extended to exploratory labs and workshops such as Gormly's *Thinking Talking Writing Dance*, a roundtable strategy of devising/discussion conceived by Gormly and hosted by Dance Ireland. Drawn from influences such as Steve Valk's *Raw Thinking Circle* (developed at Daghdha Dance Company), and 'Creative Recovery Programmes', *Thinking Talking Writing Dance* 'evolved out of the desire to discover a container that will accommodate working ideas of a group of people, entitling sovereignty and autonomy (i.e. *authorship*) to each person's train of thought, while also facilitating movement within and between'.^{vi}

Articulating a state of dance inspires flexibility, fluidity, shifting, and flux in the writer. A certain freedom from the texture and permanence of the written word is induced. Perhaps circumventing, obfuscation and the ability to connote, rather than denote, is afforded when we think of dance; a sensation of weight transference and exchange of ideas. One could argue that these characteristics offer an escape route from some of the central facets of writing, the indelible, weighty ones, that is. Perhaps here we find illustrative evidence of the reasons why dance and writing continuously seek one another out. Perhaps it is the old cliché that opposites attract.

In the (albeit awkward) coupling of text and movement, both are allowed to shed some of their features and exchange them for ones of a different nature. Thus dance perhaps gains a small, novel measure of linearity or signification in a different form, whilst writing attains a hint of the weightless.

Towards and away, towards and away

Accepting the grounds for attraction between these two creative mediums, the capacity for mutual destruction within this marriage of dance and writing seems nonetheless undiminished: a need for balance prevails. In seeking to establish a critical discourse for example, a dilemma emerges for the writer; that of the need to serve/illuminate the dance of which it speaks, but not at the detriment of the text. Inviting a state of dance allows a certain flexibility but does not resolve the problem altogether.

Similarly, dancers/makers may seek to hone the written word as a tool to serve, but not to dominate, the dance. Within the working process of dance-making, text can operate on numerous levels – from the scribbles in a choreographic notebook, to the ad-hoc written score used to document, or generate material. Whether as generative device or archival resource however, writing is usually required by dance makers to *partner* the movement, without crushing its vital ephemeral nature. There is ever-present the potential for loss in this delicate exchange; just as dance loses itself as it is executed, so too is that loss reinforced by the permanence of the written word which remains in its place.

Writers move towards a state of dance. Dancers write within the dance they author. It seems these weight shifts will be ever fruitful, ever perilous, never even; dancers and writers alike moving towards and away, towards and away...

One Final Thought

In exploring the different ways in which dance and text can interact, mutually influence, and co-habit, the benefits of attempting to write dance are evident on both sides. In addition to the economic attractions of exchange and dissemination, there is yet further a strong compulsion to talk about, and write about dance, whether within critical discourse or as a dance-maker. Despite the reasons outlined as to why this may be so, the attendant pitfalls continue to play on my mind. In spite of my own impulse to write on dance, I remain deprived of an entirely satisfactory basis for all this writing|dancing|dancing|writing.

Why is it that we all persist with the tac-tac-tac and the chat-chat-chat? Now at the end of my ruminations, I begin to wonder whether in fact we write to discover dance, to further a journey towards a state of pure dance. A state which might after all, resonate with Pozzo's concept of dance...

Is it all in fact a side-step towards speechlessness, where words - impotent, unwieldy and overly burdensome - are no longer needed? Perhaps as writers and artists, we are striving to be cradled in the moment of performance, where breath is caught, meaning immersive but joyously opaque, words silenced.

On Generating an Archive:

Writing this it is now two years since Michael Seaver records in his essay (Counting Capital: The Real Value of Dance in Irish Society) that Ireland is in the grip of 'severe flooding', and increased funding cuts. It is one year since Jeffrey Gormly (in Everyone is Going Solo, Together) notes that 'our worst fears have been realised', along with 'a savage winter'. Now it is my turn. I feel a need to chart time. With summer now firmly turned towards autumn 2011, the Presidential election race shifts up a gear, and economic woes remain. But dance is far from invisible. Whilst instability prevails, innovation and side-stepping continue. Recent new productions from companies such as Rex Levitates demonstrate a resilience in the sector, and the bustling turnout at Dublin's Grand Canal Theatre to see Cloud Gate Dance Theatre of Taiwan (during the May Dublin Dance Festival), serve to illustrate a mass audience for dance, despite the grim economic realities.

ⁱ Beckett, Samuel (1956, 2010 ed), 'Waiting for Godot: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts', Faber & Faber: United Kingdom

ⁱⁱ Lepecki, André ed. (2004) 'Of the Presence of the Body: Essays on Dance and Performance Theory', Wesleyan University Press: Connecticut, pg 127

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, pg 128

^{iv} www.fitzgeraldandstapleton.com

^v Gormly, Jeffrey (2010), 'Everyone is Going Solo, Together', published by Dance Ireland

^{vi} Gormly, Jeffrey, 'choreography: a thinking talking writing dance', www.choreograph.net

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