

THOUGHTS ON DANCE

Judy Jarvis, Toronto, October, 1973

SUBCONSCIOUS AS CREATOR

I have turned to the subconscious, the inner force, as creative source – finding expression in movement and away from my previous active role as Choreographer. That is, away from making active, deliberate insertions into the creation of a dance.

The most important changes for me, as leader, was the shifting of creative work from myself, as Choreographer, to those I worked with, the dancers. This enabled the dancers to work together – to bounce off one another, to intermingle, to inter-act.

One of the first discoveries was that, when Larry McCullough¹ and I improvised together in the same room, and then separated to different rooms to create a phrase of movement on our own, then returned to the same room and showed one another our phrases, the two phrases were inevitably complementary, and could easily be made a part of the same composition. How could this happen? Only that, beforehand, we had exchanged, consciously and subconsciously, ideas which became the material we discovered when we separated. So, two minds were able to continue along in the creative work. Where one mind was essential was in the final decision in the composition; e.g., the specific width of a second position, the rate of a torso turn, etc. Here, there had to be a director, which became myself.

In working together, a group of five dancers absorbed ideas from one another during improvisations, and then individually created their own phrases and I brought the separate phrases together into a single choreography. In this way I created the work, "Space Game"², a dance for five. However, there were slight changes in approach: in each case I gave a specific theme for the girls to take off from.

Some of the themes given were:

1. a phrase originating from the hand, a phrase originating from the head, and one from the skin.
2. three phrases with the theme of tilting the body in space.
3. four phrases with no theme, except the wide use of space.

The whole began to develop without any sense of unity (like an early Kandinsky improvisation), and so I found moments when the dancers could share movements in unison, e.g.:

1. At one moment, a sharp turn of the head on the part of all the dancers.
2. An identical phrase of movement shared by all the dancers.
3. An identical type of movement e.g., loose, gliding movements, shared by all dancers.

The end result of the dance gave the atmosphere of leaves dancing in playful winds – changing shapes and movements. The images emerged within the dance – and seemed especially clear. Often I made the final decisions on the choreography, as the dancers chose the movements for themselves that were most adaptable to their own bodies.

It may be of importance to note that during the time the dancers were creating their phrases in the same room, I left the room and did not watch or influence their creating.

During and after the performance, the girls behaved as though the dances were their own, and each acknowledged that it had been a creative experience for them.

In August, 1972, I conceived of the idea for a "Circle Dance"³ a dance which, like "Space Game", would be basically created by the dancers.

Eight dancers in a circle joined hands; first, I gave them recorded music to improvise with while joined together. This proved to be awful – too limiting – with everyone wanting to go in a different direction. Then I tried to encourage them to breathe together, to let the movements come from the breath, not to force ideas. Three rehearsals later it began to work. The dancers forgot to be conscious of one another and there developed a subconscious flow of ideas, through their movements and sounds. I let the improvisations flow on and on, with the only limit being that they must keep their hands joined, until, after a week, the ideas began to repeat one another, and I felt it was time to begin the actual setting of the dance. We returned to the strongest ideas, and gradually worked them together to set the choreography. The final result was, I felt, amazing. The girls had created it out of purely shared energy.

The dance was fluid, rich in ideas, beginning with the breakings of a telephone wire along with its clicks; swaying lines joined by hands, a single whistled tune from eight mouths, pulsing inward of a bodily mass, tensions breaking outward to a single scream and wide-stretched circle, the word "kill" resounding, movements of the feet pounding inward – the final "kill" and stampede across the floor, "I've lost my foot" crying from one – the pristine diagonal walk away, faint words "pity, pity," disdainfully spoken, heads held high. In all, multi sides of human nature emerging from the simple concept of the joined hands of the "Circle Dance". Again, my only role was to first find the basic idea-structure underlying the dance, and then to make the final decisions on the choreography.

Again, the dancers behaved in a way that the dance was theirs. I never was able to step inside their circle; in performance, they radiated, offering these, their own ideas.

INTER-ACTION

But how to bring people to the point of Co-operating, uniting?

This emerged gradually during my Summer course at the University of Waterloo in August, 1972.

One day I asked the students to shake hands with one another, mingling in a large group. Then I asked them to react truthfully in the giving and taking of the handshake, perhaps not always with the customary smile. Most of the dancers began reacting on different levels of expression, but one girl said that her only natural reaction while shaking hands was to smile pleasantly, no matter who the person or circumstance.

The others felt challenged to discover their own feelings on encountering others and they continued to expand their reactions in dance and sound. And so developed my exercise of improvisation on "inter-action" which we eventually abstracted from the handshake to the free use of space. I encouraged the dancers to let single themes develop clearly within an inter-action, before the theme changed. For example, a group of five dancers alone in space, at any chosen points. Who will begin? That is up to the dancers – energy felt leads to motion. One dancer begins to brush one foot along the floor, another dancer picks it up, and the five dancers finally catch the action. The object is never to copy one another, only to be aware of the theme passing through. The brushing feet might lead to a rocking motion from the hips, picked-up, eg. by three of the dancers translating that movement into small groups crossing the space. Inter-actions proved to be exciting, endless movements and their changes, unexpected groupings and spatial uses.

The next question was how to bring dancers in an improvisation to a single type of movement? So, I tried "inter-actions" coming to "unities". Can dancers improvising from movement idea to movement idea realize the same idea? Yes, they could. The only guidance I eventually gave was the suggestion, "inter-action coming to a unity", and the dancers found their own unity or same movement unison, evolving from their shared energies and awareness of one another in the inter-action.

Then I tried inter-actions with a theme. For example, an interaction of three dancers with the theme "walk". Often I encouraged the students to suggest their own themes, which they did. These inter-actions proved to be not difficult for the students to change from improvisations to set choreography. Finally, we tried inter-actions with a given theme, climaxing in a unity. For example, an inter-action with the given theme, "Rhythm", coming to a unity, which would mean that each of the dancers would conclude, performing the same movement-rhythm. This rhythm-theme, as in the improvisations of modern jazz musicians, had to be found from the inter-action.

In the duo work between Larry and myself, a great deal of our approach lay in inter-action. One evening, when we were at a friend's party, I asked Larry to change my position. He chose just to lightly touch my head, and I accepted my first response to "be changed", the physical reaction of a slight tilt in the torso. A few days later, we went to the Museum to a cabinet of stone carvings of ancient Egyptian gods and assumed their bodily positions, trying to feel what the movement this or that god would have made. Larry assumed the squarely, planted position of a war god, and involuntarily thrust his chest forward, lifted his head, and with wide eyes, let out a bellowing "onay-y-aa" sound! He had, through his being, discovered the nature of the god. Now, I wondered, What reaction his god would set up in my being – I reacted to him, in a crouched position, beneath him, stared upward at the seemingly unattainable god, and with a low whistle rose, head upward, to walk away.

And so, from moment to moment the changes in human behaviour and movement – each change a reaction to a previous moment. A flowing, ever changing approach to choreography, based on human reaction. Of course, the reactions had to be set, finally, to come to our piece, titled, "Changes"⁴ The Final detailed decisions as to the

composition had to be made by one mind, in this case, my own, but the choreography was a result of an inter-action between two people.

How, in Solo dance work to allow the subconscious to act as "motor" to the final composition? Where to discover this flow, that seemed to be missing from my conscious mind?

Last Christmas, Mary⁵ suggested as a theme for a Solo piece, "Sun". I accepted the suggestion, but wasn't able to create the attitude of greeting the sun or being the sun. How to approach it? I turned to the opposite of the sun, the rain, and each night for two weeks, let my being be taken over by the sensation of rain – in effect, to meditate on rain. Gradually, movements emerged from this situation, and eventually a piece was formed. The movements turned out to be contained, swaying, sometimes taking in new space, finally emerging in the bodily sensation from a single transparent raindrop to a river and flood of water. Could I have managed it, my body would have dispersed, flowing off the stage. But, perhaps the backward stretching of the neck and head had the same strength of communication, or power to transcend.

This process of "immersion" I then began with "Sun" – my body's first reaction being of heat, and so giving the hips the impulse to undulate in opposition to the torso, arms seducing the air, feet sticky to the floor. A swift run, circling the stage, created a cool breeze on the face, and relief from the all-pervading head and brilliance. This dance became for me an inter-action in space with sun.

Footnotes:

1. Larry McCullough, Toronto

2. Dancers in "Space Game" ...

Joanna Farmer	Montreal
Pam Grundy	Waterloo
Gina Lori	Waterloo
Susan Minas	Toronto
Sandy Stark	Waterloo

3. Dancers in "Circle Game" ...

Joan Fischer	Waterloo
Susan Minas, Francie Greenspoon	Toronto
Sandy Stark, Pam Grundy,	Waterloo
Dawn Honsberger	
Cathy Lee, Gina Lori	Toronto

Note: "Space Game and "Circle Game" were performed at the University of Waterloo Humanities Theatre, 1972-73.

4. "Changes" was performed by Judy Jarvis with Larry McCullough in May, 1973, at Ottawa's National Arts Centre Theatre, London England's "The Place" Theatre, and West Berlin's "Academy of the Arts".

5. Mary Wigman. In 1967 Judy Jarvis graduated from the Mary Wigman Studio of dance, West Berlin, and returned during Christmas holidays to West Berlin each year afterwards.