

‘An Articulate Something’: exploring issues of collaboration, dramaturgical thinking and transdisciplinary practice between dance and poetry

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Introduction

This paper acts as a partner document to the practical showing held on the 11 May 2016 as part of the Performance Research Group Seminar series. Both elements seek to share insights into the interdisciplinary collaboration between Scott Thurston and I, which explore the creative connections between the body, movement, and creative writing as both physical and creative acts. Our collaborative work began in 2013 with initial intensive exploration periods in Summer 2014 and Spring 2016. In this text, the chief aims and concerns of the practical research are explored, alongside the role of dramaturgical thinking present in different interdisciplinary and embodied practices.

Our collaboration began with common interests in the creative crossovers between movement and writing. Scott had developed his interest in this area through a decade’s practising Gabrielle Roth’s Five Rhythms and more recent explorations in contact improvisation, Authentic Movement, Movement Medicine, Qi Gong and the Alexander Technique. Scott has been writing poetry since 1987, developing a profile within the innovative and experimental scene of contemporary UK poetry. Only in recent years had a crossover between these streams of practice emerged, leading to desires to work creatively between his work as a poet and as a mover. I came to the project with training in American modern and postmodern dance, but professional work in European forms, including dance theatre and theatre laboratories. Work with written and spoken text within movement forms started in my work with the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange in 2002 and, since emigration to the UK, has been a key element of creative exploration as an artist/academic working in physical performance practice. A common curiosity about the potentials and possibilities between dance and poetry led quickly from a conversation in September 2013 to an initial half-day session in the dance studio in October 2013. The collaboration has developed since this point, moving from exchange to experimentation and, currently, is exploring methods of co-composition.

Although our practices are experimental and at least aim to be innovative, there is a strong foundation of practice for this work. From my own ‘home practices’, I must assert that interests in interdisciplinary collaboration within dance is not new. Quoting Margaret Kennedy,

The current picture of contemporary dance in the UK and Europe reveals that interdisciplinary work is now firmly within mainstream activity. In 2007/08 the work produced by leading dance practitioners such as Jasmin Vardimon, Maresa VonStockhert, Russell Maliphant, Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui and Akram Khan clearly demonstrated how choreographers are choosing to integrate dance with theatre, film, visual art and technology. This trend for cross-fertilisation is certainly not unique to the dance world”(2009: 64).

These dance artists, like many others in contemporary artistic practice, seek to create interdisciplinary performance as the natural result of trying to find new means of expression. Tim Etchells, artistic director of Forced Entertainment states, ‘when (artists) incorporate other aspects of other forms in their work they do so most often from a need to communicate differently, to change the kind of experience they are offering up’ (1998, 33).

Interests between dance and poetry are also not new. Poets and writers have been fascinated by dance throughout the modern era. As Terri Mester argues in her study of dance imagery in the writings of W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot, D.H. Lawrence and William Carlos Williams: ‘modernists saw in dance a mirror of their own preoccupations’ (1997, 3). Yeats, of course, is author of one of the most famous poetic reflections on dance, in the conclusion of his poem ‘Among School Children’ (1928): ‘How can we know the dancer from the dance?’ One can also point to earlier examples of poets drawn to movement as well as dance, in, for example Walt Whitman’s celebration of the moving body in ‘I Sing the Body Electric’ (1855): ‘to see him pass conveys as much as the best poem, perhaps more.’¹

Other important instances of poets writing and thinking on, about and *with* dance are Stéphane Mallarmé’s influential essays on Loie Fuller’s dancing in the 1890s, Paul Valéry’s essays on dance from the 1920s and 1930s, William Carlos Williams’ collaboration with Martha Graham in the 1940s, Charles Olson’s appearance in a Ballet Russes production in Boston in 1940 and his dance play *Apollonius of Tyana* (1951), and poet Edwin Denby’s dance criticism (1986) from the late 1903s into the 1960s. Goellner and Murphy (1995), Koritz (1995), Mester (1997), Van Den Beukel (2000) and Coulter (2004), have charted some of this territory from a critical perspective.

Despite the rich landscape of interest and work between poetry and dance, there is a space for new practices sought through *interdisciplinary* collaboration towards *transdisciplinary* artistic practice across these fields. Drawing from Felicia McCarren’s analysis on Mallarmé’s essays on dance, she sees portrayed the concept that “for the dancer to operate as poetry par excellence, she herself must remain outside of language, unable to manipulate it, and unconscious of the revelations she brings to the poet watching her” (1998). This concept chimes with the normative practices between dance and poetry: dancers might inspire poetry and poetry might inspire dance, but both dancers and poets remain mutually “unable to manipulate” within the other’s form and “unconscious of revelation” sparked in either language or movement. As a dancer and poet working collaboratively, the main aspiration for Scott’s and my work is to create new forms of transdisciplinary artistic practice: practices involving work as movers and writers that can be accessed by physical performers or creative writers alike, or underpinning interdisciplinary collaborations by other artists. The central aim is to move the relationship between dancers and writers away from that identified by MacCarran, developing methods to support creatives as mover-writers with capacity to manipulate both writing and movement in creative and performative settings.

Dance Traditions and Influences: contexts for collaboration

This stream of collaborative practice has shared focus between the acts of writing and acts of moving, but much of the time spent has focused on the ephemeral creative acts involved. Our work has considered the norms and practices in contemporary poetry readings and the acts of voicing poetry once written. However, greater attention has been given to possibilities in movement, physical acts of writing/mark-making and speaking. Many of the key references within the practical research draw from work within the American postmodern dance tradition. In the 1960s artistic movements in Greenwich village, Judson Dance Theater and Judson Poets

¹ This summary of past connections between poetry and dance is taken from a draft article being submitted to a special issue of *Choreographic Practices* on ‘Words and Dance’ for publication in Spring 2017. The text was co-authored by Scott Thurston and Sarie Mairs Slee as part of the unfinished, co-authored article.

Theater co-existed in the Judson Church building with strong cross-fertilisation between groups. In an 1995 interview, Al Carmines described this interplay, stating:

I would say at Judson probably, from '61 until '75 or '76, we had the Dance Theatre, we had the art gallery... all somehow influenced one another, and remarkably we used dancers in theatre and theatre people in dance, and Robert Rauschenberg for sets, and Allan Kaprow and Claes Oldenburg and Red Grooms and some of the artists for ... kind of ... atmosphere, and sets were created in the midst of rehearsal” (Bottoms, 1995: 2).

Artistic practices by individual dancers such as Kenneth King and Simone Forti also considered dance and poetry directly within their performance work, either as both writers and movers or in collaboration with poets.

With such references either in or after the work of Judson Dance Theater, the experimentation within the American postmodern dance tradition suits and promotes a multi-disciplinary approach. However, this research also positions its investigations in relation to the European dance theatre tradition. Rooted in German Expressionism, the work on Rudolf Laban, Mary Wigman, Kurt Jooss and others in the first half of the twentieth century was shaped in direct reaction to the tumultuous political upheaval between WWI and WWII, drawing dance’s focus away from play with grace in physical form. Instead, dance theatre artists “shared focus on corporeality and the experience of being ‘here’, ‘now’ living in the moment of making” (Preston-Dunlop et al, 2002). Even in the earliest *tanztheater* pieces, movement worked alongside other materials through the “simultaneous employment of dance, speech and sound” (Szeeman in Preston-Dunlop et al, 2002). Postmodern European dance theatre, often understood via the work of Pina Bausch, Flemish ‘Eurocrash’ choreographers Wim Vandekeybus and Anna Teresa de Keersmaeker and British DV8 Physical Theatre “continued the genre’s preoccupation with the corporeal expression of an internal/ external lived reality, but employed new means and physicalities for expression“(Preston-Dunlop et al, 2002).

These “new means and physicalities” worked across a range of visual aesthetics and approaches, but are commonly anchored in the visceral nature of dance theatre performance for both the audience and performer. For example, Bausch’s evening-length works, sometimes lasting up to four hours, involved “a series of confrontations, confessions, ritualized actions and obsessive dance sequences... that [drew] directly on the lives of the actual performers...[in a] mix of gut actuality and surreal symbolism” (Mackrell, 1997). Bausch also integrated the intensified presence of everyday, non-performative elements within the performative frame: the presence of uniformed guards and Alsatians patrolling the aisles and the disintegration of hundreds of pristine carnations throughout the performance in *Nelken* (1982), the mess, smell and rustle of a stage filled with decaying, dry leaves in *Bluebeard* (1977) or the transformation of dancers from pristine and virginal into earthy and debased through the exhaustive actions on the soil-covered stage in *Rite of Spring* (1975). Such elements made the reality of the action of Bausch’s work palpably real to its audiences: real sweat, real fear, real exhaustion and from real experiences.

The range in which dance theatre artists have pursued the genre’s “preoccupation” with the embodied experience of internal/ external reality is varied and it is this variance with provides a rich practical context for this collaborative research. In her exploration of *tanztheater* as a genre emergent from Laban’s work, Valerie Preston-Dunlop considers how this complex layering of materials relates to the genre as a whole

“...the aim is to explore not just the changing content of the work but also the ‘how’ with which the work communicates. In doing so, the genre continues to challenge conventional notions in the ways in which dance is made, performed and received- the connections between intention, impression, and interpretation as processes common to all those engaged in the dance [theatre] event” (2002, 29).

Preston-Dunlop further looks at the *polysemantic nature* of this work, not only because it is open to different interpretations, but as the signs formed in dance theatre performance emerge from a “conglomerate of features” integrating both concurrent and sequential signs from a range of sign systems. American postmodern dance also shares this polysemantic aspect, but holds a different attitude towards the meaning, reading or appreciation of the final work: the negotiation of meaning is left to the spectator. Merce Cunningham articulated this in his own work, stating “We don’t aim at producing a specific, emotional result. We present the event and leave it up to the audience to decide what is and what is not expressed” (in Denby, 1968). With choreographic modes rooted in chance and consequential juxtaposition emergent in the Judson Church Movement, American postmodern dance often leaves conscious room for the audience’s reception/perception to create the mortar to bind the meaning between disparate elements together. This particularly suits multi-disciplinary collaboration, supporting a polysemanticism that allows meaning to remain in flux, led by individual synthesis and interpretation.

Dance theatre’s use of disparate performative elements- movement, sound, speech, mediated materials, physical materials- are negotiated differently. Create processes in dance theatre involve a layer of dramaturgy or “dramaturgical thinking” (Berhndt, 2010) which embeds processes that develop “a strategy of realising dramatic structures” within the work as a whole (Traub, 2011) and “paradigms of coexistence of and interplay between different strands of meaning” (Smart, 2014). Dance dramaturgy is an emergent area of study (Berhndt 2010, Kirk 2011, Traub 2011, Solomon 2013, Smart 2014). Berhndt cites dramaturgist Raimund Hoghe’s collaboration with Pina Bausch and Wuppertal Tanztheater from 1980-1989 as one of the first examples of dance dramaturgy, laying foundations postmodern dance theatre for the desire for and negotiation of gestalt within complex, physically-driven performance. In this, the integration of dramaturgy or dramaturgical thinking is fundamental in the creative methods that define dance theatre as a genre.

In shaping the conceptual and practical frameworks for this collaborative research, the creative practices of both American postmodern dance and European dance theatre find distinct, but equally important roles. As outlined above, the American tradition provides a series of past collaborations and multi-disciplinary practices between movement and poetry from which this project might work or depart. However, these practices offer little to support a directed approach to the negotiation of received/perceived meaning by the audience. However in dance theatre, poetry and poetic language are rarely used. In the pursuit of an embodied excavation of a ‘lived reality,’ text and speech integrated into dance theatre works often come from the performers themselves, emergent in the creative process in relation to lived experiences. While this underlines the shared authorial function between the choreographer and dancers within dance theatre (Lepecki in Solomon, 2013), few dancers work in/with poetic language. Poetry is often used as a stimulus in *modernist* choreographic practices as a reference to which ideas can be abstracted into movement (as evidenced by its integration into the UK’s A-Level Dance syllabus). But the varied performative elements in dance theatre tend to emerge from the

performers' experience as creative exploration within a closed circuit; poetry is not written for and therefore rarely present in dance theatre works.

From context to practice: moving forward

As a dancer and poet working collaboratively, our main aspiration is to create new forms of transdisciplinary artistic practice. Our work consciously draws from the multi-disciplinary and/or collaborative practices of American postmodern dance and deploys the creative and dramaturgical modes implicit in European dance theatre. Both aspects support our ongoing, interdisciplinary explorations that shift co-composition away from defined performance products of 'the poetry reading' or 'the dance performance'. The central aim is to move the relationship between dancers and writers away from that identified by MacCarran, developing methods to support *creatives as mover-writers* with capacity to manipulate both writing and movement while fully conscious of the polysemantic revelations emergent in transdisciplinary work.

Scott and I's collaboration started in a state of exchange, simply leading each other in both movement and writing activities. We used improvisation as a key mode of practice which drew on both of our experiences (Five Rhythms, contact improvisation, etc.). In the summer of 2014, we started working more with set material – set movement and set text – and exploring the possibilities of improvisation, re-ordering and solo composition with a smaller collection of materials. This period of practical research also took place in a single room with allowance to write, draw, or mark-make on the walls, floor and ceiling. The room became an artefact of the ongoing experimentation, documenting the experimentations through accumulation. The current phase of work has focused more on approaches to co-composition, both of text and movement and in and out of performance settings. As the collaboration goes forward (December 2016-March 2018), we hope to work in more intensive ways and towards the creation of performance work, *A Poem in Five Movements*, as mover/writers in non-theatre settings.

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