

En place – choreographic investigations of the dancer’s awareness of ballet form

Paper and presentation

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This presentation reflects on the place of dancerly awareness of ballet form in choreographic development. It draws on my practice as a dance artist and on-going enquiry into new choreographic methods, that I have investigated through close analysis, performance and teaching practice. The recent research referenced in this paper considers the dancer’s expertise in choreographic processes – her embodied knowledge of ballet principles and repertoire as well as somatic awareness nurtured over time. I discuss the ‘first person’ dimension and how ballet principles and structures might underpin the development of choreographic methodologies that connect the concepts of ‘en place’ with the individual dancer’s creative exploration.

I begin in part 1 by outlining the context – both professional and personal – for my interest in composition as part of a ballet dancer’s practice and education. I reference the particular experiences in my career that have shaped my thinking and approach and explain the ideas that have emerged. Part 2 identifies a matrix of the principles that I use to conceptualise an understanding of the geometries of space in ballet and to develop a choreographic research model that is structurally connected into traditional ballet form. In part 3, I take an example from a recent series of performance-as-research projects (Jackson, 2005-2007) in which I focussed on the dancer’s sense of place and history and embodied academic form, to reflect on the somatic challenge to traditional methods of ballet creation. Thus the research plays on the intersection of then and now: how the ballet dancer might inhabit forms from the past and reflect their choreographic meaning in the present and how ballet choreography might enter into and stage a conversation across cultures and times.

1. Context

A lack of sustained creative development is evidenced across professional ballet practice today. It may be argued that during the twentieth century a perceptible shift occurred, away from integrated artistic practice and towards athletic body practice. Sergei Diaghilev’s artistic culture, the seed bed for both Ninette de Valois’ and George Balanchine’s work, is remembered as vividly for the individuality of its dancers as its choreographers. The Royal Ballet institution grew from De Valois’ *School of Choreographic Art* begun in 1926 and the characteristics of a once evident ‘English’ style are derived from the work of choreographers such as Frederick Ashton. Balanchine developed his training methods alongside his dance making and Denmark owes its rich dance tradition to August Bournonville, who would devise the daily company class ‘spontaneously’ (Newman 2004, p.98).

These examples provide 'compelling evidence of the interrelationship of choreographic and class practice in the development of form' (Crow/Jackson 2007, p.11¹). Both Balanchine's and Bournonville's legacies in particular are a whole schooling alongside the art work. Creativity flowered in the intimate and lively dialogue with ballet form; however the 'systems' of training associated with their work are now geared towards producing dancers to perform the existing ballets, not towards nurturing new choreographic understanding and creativity.

So, to what extent does such training, constrained by works from the past, serve individual personal development and creativity, and therefore the future of the art form?

The appointment of Wayne MacGregor as the Royal Ballet's first Resident Choreographer since 1992 was notable because of his background. His expert knowledge in choreographic methods and ability to work outside a single stylistic frame of reference was nurtured, not in first hand 'dancing' experience of ballet, but through contemporary dance practice and as an artist in education. A review of recent literature reveals that much academic writing infers a ballet culture which is thin on creative life. In the discipline of performance studies, ballet is discussed in terms of performance or interpretive skill (Schechner, 2006) and often framed as parody of creative practice. Closed methods of training towards fixed goals in specific form (Foster, 1997) are preferred to open educative methods leading from the human being as artist to new forms (Seymour, 2000). Ready-made syllabi *enchainement* dull creativity and Morris (2003) critiques teacher-led training that emphasises the mechanics of the body dissociated from understanding of 'choreographed movement'. In terms of the ballet dancer herself, Gray and Kunkel's (2001, p.21) study in High Ability says female dancers experience themselves as 'commodities and the property of companies'. They struggle for a sense of self and in the attempt to establish an identity they experience mirrors as "a source of reassurance". They are infantilised in their "inability to differentiate and develop a mature capacity for relatedness".

I use these examples to illustrate the emphasis that ballet dancers may themselves experience: on bodies not persons, on inner tightly held dependencies rather than confident inter/relations or inter/dependencies. The need for re-assurance, sourced outside of the body and notably from the mirror, feeds a distanced sense of self as belonging to someone or something other.

What is my experience?

Gray and Kunkel's study drew on testimonies of dancers in the 1980s. I would take issue with the unremittingly negative characterisation of the female dancer's experience overall; for example, where is the measure and analysis of joy - in dancing; in shared artistic pursuit and in being a part of a great tradition and art form? Whilst acknowledging this, I recognise much - a loss of identity and confidence when first leaving the Royal Ballet as an adult, and the struggle between a cosy dependency on the ballet company family and establishing relationships and professional life outside.

Working as an independent artist in education with ballet companies in the 1990s, I was exercised by distinct worlds of dance in education and vocational ballet training – both bound by different conditions and value systems, apparently irreconcilable. To characterise briefly, on the one hand I saw the three strand model (*creating, performing, evaluating*) of dance education – leading out (as in *educare*) from the person. On the other, was a training of the dancer/body – leading in, to specific performance goals. Notable was the absence of technical skill and knowledge in the one and absence of space for the individual creating dances in the other. Whereas dance education emphasised a relational, person centred, process and therefore was ‘open’ and training was subject centred, linear and oriented towards specific goals, and therefore ‘closed’.

Reflecting on the distinct philosophical frameworks of the *training* of the professional ballet dancer and a general *education* in dance, I pondered whether the methods from contemporary creative practices might be applicable in a genre specific context? In considering the notion of an *education in ballet* I identified which ballet principles might inform creative exploration with ballet as a way of dancing, and developed a model of practice-based choreographic analysis, that was linked to the framework of class (*plié, tendu, rond de jambe* etc). Alongside this work, I returned to practical ballet study with Roger Tully. Now in his eighties, Tully’s pedagogic lineage can be traced through Kathleen Crofton, a dancer with Anna Pavlova’s company, to the Maryinsky tradition and thence to Carlo Blasis. Philosophically he teaches principles of movement and begins not with the body, but with a concept - of the person’s ‘own dance’ which can be expressed thus “you have the ideal body for your own dance and your dance refines your ideal body”.²

Tully’s is an open ‘schooling’. His classes are investigative; improvised and thus ‘choreographic’. His proposition that dance is expressed physically, emotionally and intellectually and that training is necessary in all *three* spheres reflects a kind of three stranded model. Emphasis is on discovery, and the felt sense of dancing the ‘choreographic text’. Questions are encouraged, reflective understanding is forged in the process of acquiring practical knowledge - ‘how’ to dance. Implicit is a conception of physical practice that is transformative on the levels of both instrument and dance material or text, experiential and constituted in the interrelationship between the intellectual, physical, emotional bodies.

2. Working from Ballet Principles

These experiences laid the foundation for my interest in investigating new choreographic processes in ballet as part of the dancer’s development as an artist.³ I questioned in particular the separation of classroom knowledge of ballet and its choreographic exploration in the artist’s studio.

The perception that knowledge of ballet is useful for developing both technical expertise and the dancer’s body or instrument is common, but its potential as

human expression, in choreographic theory and methods, is under-explored. Yet ballet offers a resource for choreographers – a set of organising principles of the body's movement and position in space and time, a conceptual map that corresponds with the (highly effective) principles that underpin technical training and develop in particular the dynamic potential and range of movement associated with rotation around the centre line of the aplomb.

In developing frameworks for creative exploration, I have identified distinctive features of ballet that are applicable to choreographic understanding and attempt to theorise ballet movement in terms of dance itself, that is in terms of the human being, space and time.⁴ Moving away from interrogating vocabulary that describes actions or qualities, I consider principles of ballet spatial grammar - as concepts or ideas (see below) - in order to open up more layered interpretations of the terms and to allude to the complexities (physical/affective/intellectual) of the dancer's experience. These concepts also infer movement/position/space and offer a theoretical understanding of the internal and external architectures of the body in space as built on an interrelationship of the following principles: En place - En face - En dehors, En dedans - En croix

En place – Me, my aplomb, where I am, poised in relationship to gravity, balanced on the axis of vertical and horizontal plane, my physical centre, and my sense of self

En face – My 'front', where I am facing, relative to an audience: from where I am observed and whom I address

En dehors, En dedans – My movement outwards and inwards, the spiral, expanding and contracting, my sense of communication with an audience, action and reflection, sun and shade

En croix – my movement along virtual lines to the front, side and back; movement of body parts (e.g. my legs and arms), framework for direction and line of travel

By exploring the principles of spatial geometry (*en place/ en face/en croix/en dehors and en dedans*) with somatic awareness, the ballet dancer learns to understand her body in space and develop a sense of 'place' - of being at home in her body (*en place*). Ballet practice defines where the dancer faces (*en face*) as a precise direction in space. Her position in space can be defined in simple terms - a circle mapping a square - that replicate geographical compass points. The combination of vertical and horizontal action in precise directions (*en croix*) in relation to her *en face*, makes her location and movement as a human being in space legible, and through breath and the imaginative flow of lines, indicates the interconnection of the whole body with time and space (*en dehors and en dedans*).

In developing choreographic tasks, I depart from a de-constructed body model (as in Forsythe's *Improvisation Technologies*, 1999) in favour of an integrated 'whole body' model that acknowledges the ballet dancer's relationship with

gravity, her centre and verticality. Awakening the sensation of being '*en place*' enables the dancer to link her experience of moving according to organising principles with composing from those principles. If the dancer is centred *en place*, imaginatively she experiences her sense of self as a 'virtual' centre - even when her physical centre of gravity is dis-placed. This sense of self is integral to her 'own dance' and to her part in the larger choreography and community of practice and arguably, to generating new knowledge and forms from traditions (such as the Romantic).

Balanchine compared making his ballets to the construction of a building and like an architect he understood the visual rhythms of different structures (Joseph, 2002, p.8). The concept that space and time are linked in an ordered way⁵ and that the dynamic of movement is intrinsic to the geometry of the spatial architecture or 'shape', is useful in finding rhythmic drive and in shaping 'musical' movement. Large rhythms that can be observed in the natural world such as the flow of tides and planets, are bound by gravity. The dynamic of movements such as swing or *ballon*, also clearly relate to gravity (Pavskevskaja, 2005). In ballet training, dancers are educated to feel such movement and shape in relation to musical time. Timing can also be determined by how the dancer feels and performs actions in space – in a 'natural' or non-metric time that is personal to the dancer.

3. Case Study: Moment, Gesture and Principle as a Research Model.

My research focused on developing choreographic methods that place ballet both more deeply within and beyond its own tradition and the person at the centre of creative exploration. Sylvie Fortin (2003) contends that cross fertilisation between somatic and dance practice fosters individual creativity. Ballet training emphasises the outside perspective on the body (Jackson, 2005) but arguably, teaching practices that integrate somatic awareness with Tully's concepts, educate the dancer's awareness of the interrelationships between (inner) senses of self and (outer) place in the physical and cultural world, thus forging a dynamic dialogue between her subjective and objective knowledge.

In a series of three interrelated Performance as Research projects, *Retrieving the Sylph*, *Unwrapped*, and *In the Reveal* I considered the place of dancerly expertise - embodied knowledge of ballet principles and repertoire as well as somatic awareness developed over time.⁶ The research crucible was a conception of class and creative exploration where the physical, intellectual and affective spheres of the dancer's experience are engaged, and a interrogation of received ballet culture from the 'first person' perspective. The research posed the following questions:

How can dancers' inscribed knowledge of balletic grammar and somatic awareness be employed in choreographic tasks?

How can somatic awareness make the histories of Romantic Ballet available for re-invention?

The conference presentation used the development of a 'shared' solo from *In the Reveal* (2007) to illustrate (through practical demonstration and dvd footage) research methods and the emerging dance text. I wished to

demonstrate how working in the space between knowledges, allows for a rich layering of personal and shared dance histories, multiple perspectives and authorship in ballet choreography. The solo was constructed from four dancers' (aged 25-58) somatic exploration of the Sylph gesture, developing material explored in *Retrieving the Sylph* (2005). Our work interrogated the notion that choreographic forms and gestures, as structures in space, are available for re-invention through somatic experience. .

In the Reveal was the third project in the research series. Each of the projects focussed on a moment, a gesture and a principle exemplifying received ballet culture (with an emphasis on the nineteenth century) and developed this as new choreographic form. Three broad sites of knowledge – dancerly, choreographic and the academic and choreographic canon – were set in relationship with each other and played out in differently framed tasks. For example, the first project, *Retrieving the Sylph* considered the archetype of the Romantic Sylph (moment *La Sylphide*, 1832), notions of 'other' and the idealised feminine in twenty-first century ballet practice. Movement was developed through tasks constructed around somatic, first person interrogations of the form of ballet gestures (the Sylph 'shape', academic class material (*tendu, port de bras*) and principle (the vertical line of the aplomb). The choreography, a solo for a man or a woman was performed in Gotland, Stockholm and London.

In the Reveal expanded the somatic and spatial dimensions of the interrogation of form to focus on dance histories of the present moment. It re-invented choreographic gesture from *Retrieving the Sylph* and *Unwrapped* for a three dimensional performance space without proscenium arch. The work was staged with the audience straddled across each of the four corners of a studio and played with the notion of immersion by integrating the choreographer-as-performer into the dance structure and the audience in the performing frame. Choreographic tasks employed ballet principles of spatial geometry (*en place/en face/en croix/en dehors,dedans*) to investigate the notion of the dancer's somatic experience as tied to a material sense of particular 'place' and the relationship of the imagined sense of geographical place with the dancer's square.

The research referenced geographer Doreen Massey's (2006) conceptualisation of space and place to investigate parallels with principles underpinning ballet and the idea of the individual dancer's physical sense of *en place* as both historically and geographically situated – at the virtual and actual intersection of vertical and horizontal planes. Massey identifies geographical distance, speed and difference as being tied to the inescapable "materialities of place", space as having the "dimension of simultaneity" and time the "dimension of change". She argues for the slow experience of time as a response to "friction-free" technological space. Reaching across places and times, we made somatic experiments with fragments of material from particular ballet histories – the Romantic – and our own histories and embodied sense of place.

The series re-thought the knowledge of the dancer, choreographer or teacher as a continuum - always in flow and into which the dance artist can enter at any, or multiple points. As the choreographer, I moved in and out of the dancing, drawing on my own dancerly knowledge or that of the dancers when directing material as the outside eye. I considered the impact of perspective on improvisations with gesture or class sequences - perceived from outside (distanced, 'listening') or from inside (immersed, 'speaking'). Group discussion – reflecting on understanding of principle, articulating references to the personal and shared ballet histories and texts, and the pleasure of dancing – also fed the development of the choreography.

The important relationship in ballet between music and dance was not highlighted in this research. To tighten the focus on geometries of space, sonic and musical material was layered as a response to dance material and the overarching choreographic structures were built from a consideration of the rhythm and shape of the movement itself. The somatic emphasis in class and choreographic methods placed the individual's first person experience of dancing along the continuum of knowledge resourced in the choreographic development. At the heart of studio work was an interrogation of the feeling, form and function of shapes and gestures from academic class material and choreographic canon. As dancers / choreographers we explored the dynamic, structural, rhythmic, harmonic and affective dimensions of ballet shape and movement. Working on choreographic tasks that connect with the principles underpinning the ballet form, the dancers mobilised their own dance knowledge within a clear creative structure. The sense of exploration and discovery thus enabled, contrasts sharply with methods for developing material that require the dancer to follow instructions, or use a system for generating movement, or to respond, in terms of existing vocabulary, to music.

Entering into this kind of open choreographic dialogue with the ballet canon through somatic exploration is exciting territory that has the potential to engage in a meaningful way with the tradition. *In the Reveal* was given at the Taking Place International Performance-as-Research Seminar at London Metropolitan University and later in Guildford and venues in London. Audiences commented on the “liberation of space”, and “multiple narratives” in the work and the sense that the audience were participants in the dance. On the performance of *Retrieving the Sylph* by Jenny Nilson at the Linbury Theatre in London, Giannandrea Poesio (2005) in the *Spectator* commented on a “re-thinking of ballet” and the “unpredictable immediacy and clarity” of the choreography. Given the somatic first person interrogation at the heart of the choreographic process, Jann Parry's (2005) comment is especially interesting: “Deceptively simple, it was designed to be seen and enjoyed from any angle, a piece looking outward instead of at its own innards”.

Concluding thoughts

I am interested in choreography that accounts for both relationship with and change in traditional epistemologies. The central question in this research - how can subjectivity and objectivity be configured as process (movement) not product (fixed position) in ballet choreography - enabled flow in the dialogue

between the given principles repertoire and artistic enquiry and opened up further research questions between sites of knowledge. How does the language and form speak back through somatic awareness to the dance artist? What layers of history and understanding are embedded in the canonical structures? In how many ways does a choreographic investigation between academic theoretical and practical application and expertise open up understanding? How does personal knowledge and experience intersect with shared knowledge to invent new forms that speak forwards and backwards in space and time?

This project suggests that developing choreographic knowledge through somatic awareness speaks to concerns about lack of creative and artistic development in ballet. Failure to address the need for a rounded education in ballet will sustain out-dated methods of training that feed the imbalance between the athletic and artistic dimensions and a narrow culture that is body not person centred.

Ballet provides an apt model of enquiry. Its form, defined by robust principles and repertoire, and the interdisciplinary nature of its practices are a coherent base for investigating choreographic imagination. Ballet theorisation of space engages the dancer's awareness of the in- and out-side perspective on the body, when balanced by a somatic approach to practice. The awakened insider's perception of choreographic principles and structures connects ballet with insights into, for example, body awareness and kinaesthetic imagination, and generates new approaches that might play between spheres, perspectives and knowledges to make new forms.

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DVD Footage:

Retrieving the Sylph (2005)

1. Exploring gesture in Sylph Shapes and Academic Vocabulary
2. Exploring movement within the Architecture of the Shape

In the Reveal (2007)

1. En dehors and En dedans: Moving in and out of the Sylph Shape; Developing individual material as a shared solo
2. Moving between dance and personal experience – the idea of home in the dancer's own dance expression; Using the feeling of en place and en croix to relate the imagined sense of geographical place to the dancer's square.

¹ See our *Dancing Times* article for further discussion of issues around the choreographer's pedagogic knowledge.

² Roger Tully's book *The Song Sings the Bird: a Manual on the Teaching of Classical Dance* will be published in 2009 by Gremese (www.gremese.com). I elaborate on his influence on my practice and the fruitful application of somatic approaches in the technical development of the dancer in *My Dance and the Ideal Body*, in *Research in Dance Education* (2005).

³ The ideas shared in this presentation build on research I have conducted over 12 years through: *Ballet in the Twenty-first Century* BIG choreographic courses and seminars with Susan Crow, workshops in Korea, Japan and Sweden; in choreography teaching both the MA in Post Classical Forms at University of Surrey and in collaboration with Kate Flatt at the Royal Ballet School.

⁴ I take choreographic understanding to infer the intentional use of human movement in space and time for artistic communication.

⁵ Charles E Joseph's book about Stravinsky and Balanchine collaboration, 2002 p3, quotes Balanchine in *Poetics of Music* (by Stravinsky). "We are presenting [the] art of dancing, [the] art of body movement, in time, in space. ...It must be order – it's like a planet. Nobody criticises the sun or moon or the earth because it is very precise, and that's why it has life. If it's not precise it falls to pieces".

⁶ The series built on my research collaboration with Patrick Wood (dance artist) and Tom Armstrong (composer) and conference presentation at PARIP 2005, entitled *New Beauties* that experimented with different relationships between academic class (principles and forms) and choreographic production.