

The Role of Critic: Reflections on Contemporary Dance Art

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Abstract

Art criticism is not easy. It is often an uncomfortable undertaking that requires (if it is to be done well) an enormous range of knowledge and a focused, neutral sense of judgment. In suggesting that it requires enormous knowledge I am of course tacitly endorsing the idea of the 'expert' who knows all about past art, and thus all about past artistic standards, and who can therefore be relied on to tell the rest of us how and why a work is good, when we are not able to experience it on our own. The idea of a critic as one who stands between a work of art and the receiver of that work, and mediates the relationship, is problematic for many reasons.

Not the least of which is being consistent and fair-minded in a way that requires careful introspection as well as a certain depth of philosophizing. Then there is the word-smithing of the critic themselves. While reviewing the efforts of others to have any credibility at all, the critical writer must develop his or her own artistic skills. Even so, discussing Art can quickly become a shouting match and whoever is the loudest wins? Of course a shouting match can be the result whether or not a third party critic is involved. However, perhaps we can agree a critic is just full of hot air until they've added something artistic of their own to the discussion. . Which brings one to ask, what of critics who are artists themselves? A critic who is also an artist in the relevant discipline can spin on their criticism in a way that is informed by their personal artistic taste, and can be seen as a failing in the notion of an objective and unbiased fellow artist. One might go so far as to suggest that these 'artistic' critics, if not all critics, routinely infiltrate and confiscate works of art and pigeon-hole them into categories that line up with the critic's preferences and further his agenda. So what is it then that society wants the critic to do with and for the work of art, and with and for whoever attends to the criticism itself? And why do these things need doing, and what is lost if these things do not get done? So, clearly, finding something of value or even coherent in the world of art that anyone will give credence to or pay attention to is a thankless task. And yet at the heart of any golden age of theatre we find the bobbing heads of critics dodging the arrows and slings of indignant artists who believe their efforts are above reproach and the pedestals they have placed themselves upon should be considered sacred ground and remain inviolate from the slanderous slavering of any pompous self-absorbed or vindictive critic. In taking such a stance creators deny themselves the clarion call of the critic who makes observations and asks insightful questions. Without a doubt critics do far more than offend or flatter artists.

- Consider Aristotle. The treatise we call the Poetics was written 50 years after the death of Sophocles. Aristotle was a great admirer of Sophocles and considered Oedipus the King the perfect tragedy. And his analysis of that play brought into focus and defined the nature of the Greek Tragedy and continued to provide a significant model for theatrical playwriting thereafter. A contrary reader might point to the Theater of the Oppressed and Augusto Boal's critique of Aristotle's 'coercive system of tragedy.' The gist of which is to link state/authoritarian power with western formalist aesthetics.
- Moving into the arena of Movement Art, Deborah Jowett recognized early on the choreographic brilliance of Mark Morris and her insightful writing surely helped to elevate his work to the status it enjoys to this day.

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- On the other hand, Arlene Croce who writes for the New Yorker would not see Bill T. Jones's Still/Here, a work about AIDS and HIV, stirred up great controversy because she refused to attend any performances, claiming that it was 'unreviewable.' In an article called "Discussing the Undiscussable," she labeled the work 'victim art.'

It is true. How can one criticize men and women on stage who were dying of AIDS? It might better be called dance therapy rather than movement art. In this case the artist was using movement and the critic was using words to make social commentary. Bill T. Jones is not the only one, of course, who has drawn considerable attention with similar approaches. Inspiring a sense of pity in some—a feeling of being manipulated by others—but never transforming fear and pity into awe and wonder. One might ask, "Is this what art should do? Many say yes, many don't, and it is a reasonable point of contention. That said, by placing deformed children, or a beloved professor on stage with Parkinson's disease, or the family members of dead veterans in the spot light and having them move around and talk about their feelings the choreographer (inadvertently perhaps) wraps herself or himself in a cocoon that has the effect of insulating the creator from any real discussion. Who could say anything bad about a child with a cleft palate? Or feel anything but sympathy for the families of dead war heroes? Dance therapy? Maybe. Victim art? Surely. A new style of Movement Theater? Not really. Hard to say what the artistic goal is. Entertainment?

Reflections on Contemporary Dance Art

Dance Artists (or maybe any kind of artist) have one choice it seems—to either take the accepted methodologies and add their own unique point of view or reject those methodologies and find new ones. Both are entirely legitimate approaches to the act of making time based art. However, the way the choice is laid out puts the "accepted" routes into an always-privileged position such that every other route is seen in relation to it, as some degree of acceptance or rejection of the "accepted." Today many artists object to being positioned in this way – as if our position must always explain itself by referring to some norm to which it is or is not adhering.

Case in point, Classical Ballet with its codified steps and romantic ideals was the accepted approach for 300 years and many romantic and classical choreographers added their voices to the form. Then in one momentous reversal Modern Dancers rejected the steps, the structures and the subjects of classical/romantic ballets and created new approaches, new subjects and individual techniques to train the body. These new approaches were inspired by Isadora Duncan's belief that the essence of movement was to be found in *transition* not *position*. Sixty years later Post-Modern dance artists rejected the need for formal technique entirely and contended that all movement is dance and anyone can dance with or without formal training. This brings us to contemporary dance, the latest incarnation in Time Based Art, which has been loosely defined by some as a combination/permutation of all of that which has come before. A little vague. Surely contemporary dance is more than just a melding of previous approaches! Could it be the place where the past meets the future? Is it too soon to say? Certainly it is not just about training the body so much as it is about ways of making movement art and a quest for new forms and new content. And any and all techniques have application—from classical to post-modern. And contemporary choreographers often devise their own systems to prepare the body for the demands of their work.

During the summer of 2015 and again this spring, contemporary' works were filling the theaters and being showcased in festivals from Vienna to Prague to Berlin to Dublin to Montpellier to Montreal. These dances were not classical, neo-classical, modern or post-modern as defined by dance historians and critics. Some most certainly could be labeled as 'Performance Art.' The new work seemed to be characterized by the following things:

- Movement involving joint articulations and broken lines
- Movement that stands at both ends of the physical spectrum—from the minutely intimate to the physically impossible.
- The expanding use of technology as an artistic tool
 - Lights
 - Film
 - Video
 - Projections
- Homage to the past as well as the culture of the creating artist.

- Subjects that reflect the world we live in.

Mouvements choreographed by Marie Chouinard and performed in Berlin summer of 2015 repeated in the Montpellier International Festival of Dance summer of 2017 reflects all these characteristics and embodies the new paradigm some are calling—contemporary dance. What follows are the musings of an enthusiastic entrepreneur who has sampled, savored and wants to share. Rather more like fevered observations of a wine enthusiastic rather than a Supreme Court judge.

Chouinard's Mouvements begins with two dancers moving laterally, back and forth across the middle of the stage. They seem spastic and deformed as they limp to and fro. They speed up, slow down, twitch, walk with a hitch in their step, a cocked hip, a head twisted forward, one shoulder thrust unnaturally backward, arms are akimbo and askew evoking various stages of urgency, helplessness, anger, resignation and despair, as if wanting to speak but can't—or simply needing to arrive. But their destination is a mirage that eludes and tortures them—just out of reach.

There is a small circular platform raised several inches off the floor center front of the stage. Two women sit on the platform—one in the lap of the other. They are embracing. The platform begins to turn. Suddenly a gigantic image of them is projected onto the cyclorama. The image telescopes up across the surface of the screen, reminiscent of Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase," but in reverse. It is like being inside of a kaleidoscope that begins to extend. The women are projected into space in image after image, one layered onto the one before, spilling upward into infinity in blues and greens and gold.

This platform duet morphs into a series of grotesqueries—with faces projecting horror, repulsion, sorrow, hunger, desire—mouths gape, tongues protrude, eyes bulge. It is intimate, nearly infinitesimal on the dancers in the huge theater—gargantuan as images of them are amplified and flung in layers onto the screen behind. And now a chorus of limping dancers enter to travel in individual deformities back and forth across the space. They are pathetic and sorrowful, lost. Then something shifts and they are terrifying, alien creatures on the hunt for prey. Titans looking for things to devour. They are wearing black with hoods that are pulled up to mask their faces. Their backs are bare. Hands and feet and backs are startlingly white against the black. They mask and unmask themselves as they go. The platform duet has disappeared.

The limping creatures hunt urgently then exit as if launching themselves toward the kill. Three remain. And now a ménage is performed with one woman the height of a giraffe and two others. It is elegant filled with longing, extraordinary extensions and turns that rise and melt and rise again. All the while there is a reminiscence of the pitiful and the grotesque. This trio is also projected onto the screen and we see their intimacies, their longings, because all these dancers perform with their faces with the same eloquence and emotional honesty as their bodies. One woman is continuously pulling up her hood to cover her face then lifting it with a high pitched scream so melodic and piercing that it happens several times before the viewers realize it is not a part of the score. The film behind plays intimately with time so that it proceeds then follows or is simultaneous with what is happening among the three. It finishes with the cry evocative of Edvard Munch's 'Scream.'

The limping hunters return. They are masked and predatory. They flock together and apart like carnivorous birds. They take flight only to return. From amongst them a duet is delivered onto the stage. There is intimacy, slow, curved shelters are made with their bodies and entered, but it is too soon—one retreats—the other must follow a moment later. The woman stops. The man closes in. Roles change. The one who shelters becomes the sheltered. The lines of their limbs and the tilt of their heads are broken, imploring. They offer one another refuge, but they do not touch. So close. So tender. They look about and freeze in their intimacies nothing but a breath between them but somehow they cannot or do not see. This too is projected onto a screen as large as a temple wall and our very own intimacies are revealed—the attempts and the failures, the stillness of triumph. All are seen as if we have fallen into Milton's "Paradise Lost and Regained." And now we and they realize that a place of sanctuary has been built and the lovers turn to one another and then to us and—see.

The chorus of limping haunts returns covered in their black hoods, enraged and hurl themselves at the universe of the stage until they fall exhausted, a mountain of crushed bodies, emotional debris, that we see projected on to the screen, as if witnessed by the eye of God. Then slowly by slowly they begin to rise up and move across the great expanse of the stage that has been their battlefield.

God's eye moves in and we see their faces close up painted in film on the wall. And the agonies they seem to witness are documented in their awful, painful journey toward dust or redemption. We do not know which. Their

faces evoke the agonies of giving birth or being born, the awful pains of mortality. Thoughts of Abu Ghraib, Kim Phuc running naked from her napalmed village, the aftermath of Auschwitz, child slavery and sexual abuse pass through our minds eye. We watch and we see as they bear witness for us all. It seems to go on endlessly each moment more revealing more painful than the last.

Finally the struggle is finished. An old woman seated in the balcony begins to weep quietly. Then a naked figure clothed in transparent white gauze enters and performs a ritual blessing. Melodramatic? No. Ethereal. Ecstatic, Sublime. The theater goes silent. It has been filled all the while with the churning, clicking, grinding, humming, beating sounds of the universe breathing, shouting, whispering, crying out—a plea for life to continue, to be better, to go on.

Two dark figures, each bearing an enormous white wing, pass through the stilled chaos and the pilgrimage is ended.

It has been said that the body is the metaphor for the soul (assuming as we do in Western Civilization that everyone has a soul). If that is so, then Chouinard in her epic work peeled away that shroud and gave us a glimpse beneath the façade that is our physical form. It is a work so profound and affecting it could be described as mythological—a symphony of architectural design and sound, a vision, a prophecy, a testament, a pilgrimage. It is a dance for our times that examines the dark, the profound, the disturbing, the sinister, the ecstatic, the terrifying, the erotic, and the heartbreaking. It compels us to look inside ourselves and the world we live in and what we see is horrifying, disturbingly beautiful but ultimately hopeful. Chouinard's work suggests that contemporary dance at least in subject matter has shifted entirely away from Romanticisms and Modernisms. To place her work in some sort of context I turn to a performance of Vienna's leading academy of Dance—Konservatorium Wien—Vienna's equivalent of Julliard. The program consisted of: Trisha Brown's Set and Reset, Liz King and Catherine Guerin's Swan Lake, Remixed and Doris Uhlich's "Energetic Bodies" Set and Re-set is a post-modern American work created in 1983 that is considered one of the most important works of American post-modernism. This was a reconstruction. I have seen the original so I was anxious to see it done by non-Americans. The 500 seat theater was filled to capacity.

The performance began as the audience was entering. In the darkness on stage dancers could dimly be seen moving about in casual attire as if getting ready, marking material, warming up and getting preparing to perform. The wings, designed by Robert Rauschenberg (1983), a contemporary of Jackson Pollock and who has done much design work (costumes and sets for Merc Cunningham), were transparent plastic sheets hung from ceiling to floor and did not hide the dancers who could be seen through the curtains milling about waiting throughout the piece waiting to enter or re-enter.

The movement vocabulary of the dance was somewhat pedestrian, gestural—casual and consisted of swinging arms and legs, minimal partnering (no assisted lifts, but leaning on one another briefly and engaging without any sense of acknowledgement of one another.) They could have been leaning against a wall to take a rest after a walk. As is traditional with post modern-dance, the movement was not technical and required little effort. The work could just as easily have been performed by people off the street, except for perhaps the difficulty of remembering the sequence—which seemed improvised at random, but clearly was not. The dance went on for around 15 minutes, stopped, reset and repeated.

The performing attitude was one of indifference. Dancers did not engage with the audience whatsoever and gave the impression that they were doing it for themselves and you could watch if you wanted it made no difference to them. The dynamics were a flat line, there were no accents, no rhythmic acuity or accumulation of material that gave any feeling that they were building toward any sort of conclusion. "Art for art sake." Watch or don't no one cares. One of my companions fell asleep. The dancers were fit and lean and surely had reserves not yet revealed.

Even in the bow the performers exuded studied indifference. Again after intermission the audience re-entered to find dancers milling about in the dimness on stage. And a piece entitled Swan Lake, Remixed by choreographers Liz King and Catherine Guerin began. The Rauschenberg wings were gone. The back wall was bare—no curtain or cyclorama. The dancers were wearing traditional leotards and tights. A soloist stood on the apron downstage right holding several gauzy, muted gray tutus. She did a solo where she caressed her body with the tutus, then began to discard them about the stage.

This seemed to be some sort of signal and the rest of the dancer came to life. Not studied indifference this time, nor a romantic rendering of the Petipa fairytale. The music was a pastiche of Tchaikovsky, Pulsing and Tunakan. What unfolded was respectful at times, clever at others—a physically demanding homage to an old classic. The difference was in this version there was no story line, no prince, no magician and no court dance before a king. Briefly we did see the baby swans but this time (while the foot work was still incredibly quick) there were a number of trios holding hands with the dancers twisting, curving their backs, dancing with their spines as if they were another limb while doing the traditional rapid fire foot work. Dancers did fall the to the floor and strike poses that reminded one of the death of a swan and Pavlova was surely lurking in the wings, in the dark somewhere, wondering.

The studied indifference was gone. The display of technique was impressive. But there was no stopping to do a grande'pas de duex facing the audience, no romantic overtones. But flat out kick ass dancing—mind boggling turning and leg work but no sense of showing off or staring meaningful off into the distance as if standing posed with a leg in the air was enough to warrant our undivided attention. What a contrast to Set and Reset! Again and again reference was made to Petipa's original work but in such a way that brought new meaning to the subject and refreshing new vocabulary into the mix—Liz King and Catherine Guerin doing a variation on a theme of Marius Petipa. It was a variation that was subtle, daring, quite far removed from the original and enormously effective. Traditionalist would have hated it. The Vienna audience got it and couldn't seem to get enough.

What I was reminded of and what quickly became apparent was that *superbperformances* can have many manifestations the least of which is how many spins one can do or how high one can get one's leg. There was not a single grand jete' in the show. And yet these were highly trained dancers. What also became apparent is that these dancers are studying choreography and performance with the same depth and commitment as they do technique. As noted in the program, each piece required their contribution to the form and content of the works as it did the performance of them. It was noted in the program that the creative process was collaborative and that dancer's contributed extensively to the movement vocabulary of the piece. From studied indifference to a respectful and unique homage. What next?

Energetic Bodies, choreographed by Doris Uhlich, a graduate of the Vienna conservatory, was the final piece on the program. Ten women and one man enter, fill the stage and stand motionless. They are looking down. The audience settles into place after intermission and waits. The dancers continue to stand motionless. Their hair is long and loose. Their costumes are casual t-shirts and sweat pants. They continue to stand. The final stirrings of the audience end and the theater goes completely quiet. The dancers remain motionless. The silence in the theater deepens. The dancers do not move. The audience waits. The dancers are stock still, unmoving, frozen. Now the silence is filled with tension. Then when the tension seems almost unbearable we notice one dancer is beginning to imperceptibly lower her head. Then another. One by one, with complete self-control and measured slowness they begin to sink to the floor pulled down by the weight of their own heads. There is no sound other than the heartbeat of the audience which seems to hold its breath. At the last moment when their heads can pull them no lower the dancers give in to gravity and collapse to the floor—some melting quietly, others at the last moment crashing into a helpless heap. All along their faces have been averted from the audience and this continues to be so as they now all lie unmoving in repose, with corpse like stillness. Undetectably one dancer upstage begins to twitch his arm.

Then another her leg. Then another her head. The music of Destiny's Child—"Survivor" ruptures the silence. The twitching becomes more forceful, then steadily increasing to the point of ferocity as if the dancers are caught in the throes of some invisible force—not unlike ecstatic followers of Dionysus in Ancient Greece possessed from within by the God they follow. The twitching has taken over their whole bodies now and becomes thrashing convulsions, brutal, out of control, painful to watch. It continues in various endless permutations. Then when it seems as if we can bear no more, the convulsive thrashing begins to pull the dancers to their feet and continues while standing. There is no attempt to be in unison other than through intent. But we now begin to see faces. The music changes seamlessly into Red Hot Chili Peppers—"Give It Away." The dancers begin to hurl themselves across the stage only to freeze in an attempt to balance impossibly with only one point of contact on the floor—a knee, a foot, a single hand, a shoulder, the head.

The hurtling energy of those still rushing about knocks them down but they get up and try again in spite of this interference to balance in excruciatingly impossible poses, again and again and again. And now we see this is not possession, but willing submission, a studied attempt to demonstrate what is physically possible at the furthest ranges of what must be dreadfully painful to try and sustain.

The focus of the dancers is now upon us as well as each other while these herculean feats are rapidly and violently continued. We are drawn into the struggle like rough seas to a dangerously rocky shore.

Heads thrash, bodies convulse, limbs are hurled, torsos bend and twist and quiver. It is relentless and we are helpless to turn away. Nor do not wish to do so. The dancers are caught up, smiling and haughty in the physical magnificence of their efforts. They egg each other on and we go with them willingly—an irresistible force we are caught up in and cannot turn away from—a joyous, raucous, celebration of self-emollition that does not diminish but in fact empowers.

The dancers pause. We hold our breath. After a brief poignant monologue from a breathless dancer holding a microphone, they begin again. This time in single file rushing forward as if to hurl themselves into space and the abyss. The frenzy goes on, speeds up—intensifies. How is it possible? Finally when it seems we can bear no more it ends. The theater continues to throb—a super nova wound up and ready to be flung into the nearest black hole. Instead we are hurled to our feet shouting in admiration. The dancers skip and trip and rush forward to bow in acknowledgment of our adulation, grinning in pride at what they no doubt know they have accomplished. They leave. They come back. They grin and bow gain and again and again. They have done something wonderful.

It was the perfect concert: Three pieces unified by the skill of the dancers, the arrangement of the program, the imaginative transitions between the dances and the use of the space that calculated to carry us from: *Studied indifference* followed by a *unique homage* to finish with an *Olympia feat* that placed these dancers and their director on a hilltop looking over at a horizon the rest of us long for, that is surely their destination, a place where only the few are ever privileged to go.

As a final point of comparison—Wikipedia describes Performance Art as: “...a performance presented to an audience within a fine art context, traditionally interdisciplinary. Performance may be either scripted or unscripted, random or carefully orchestrated; spontaneous or otherwise carefully planned with or without audience participation. The performance can be live or via media; the performer can be present or absent. It can be any situation that involves four basic elements: time, space, the performer's body, or presence in a medium, and a relationship between performer and audience. Performance art can happen anywhere, in any venue or setting and for any length of time. The actions of an individual or a group at a particular place and in a particular time constitute the work.”

More simply—anybody, any place, anytime; anything with in a fine arts context. The artist maybe seeking an effect or not. “Impact Art,” “Assault Art,” “Endurance Art,” “Guerilla Theater,” “Dance as a Weapon,” “Movement as Social Commentary”: are some phrases that came to mind that have associations with performance art that seek an effect. Yoko Ono’s Scissors Piece is familiar to many as an example of performance art that had a powerful effect on those who saw it.

Approximately two thirds of works showcased summer of 2017 at the International Festival of Dance in Montpellier, France fall within the above parameters for performance art and offer a stark contrast to what seems to be emerging in contemporary dance art. A case in point:

Steven Cohen’s sput your heart under your feet...and walk started with the audience being led into the space to discover neatly articulated rows of foot-wear covering the center and largest part of the stage. On one side of the shoe gallery there was a large tripod that suspended three small, old-fashioned record players in the air with the kind of metal chains one would find on a swing set in a children’s playground. On the other side of the stage there was a small table with elaborate candelabra and a table setting for one. A film began to play and a figure appeared on the screen covered with flamboyant face decorations with delicate filigreed embellishments that gave the performer the ethereal quality of a moth fluttering just out of range of the light. Two foot high heels, a corset, variations on a gauzy full-length tutu covered but did not mask his body. Buttocks were bare. Genitals emasculated by a painful looking cod piece. In the film this strange and wonderful creature struts and poses and cavorts about in a public park. Slowly, then the same performer began to slip delicately out of the wings and onto the live stage.

After tiptoeing about, Cohen dons the swing set harness and walks about the stage playing old show tunes on the antique phonograph like a cigarette girl selling her wares in a speakeasy. He walked delicately about for a bit fluttering his big moth eyes and teetering on his tall shoes only able to keep his balance by using the stilt like crutches.

This went on for a while. Then the film playing on the back curtain morphed into a documentary of Cohen in all his glory entering a slaughter house and bathing in the blood and viscera of cows being butchered over him. Meanwhile, on stage Cohen proceeded to light the candelabra on a dining table. Then in a little girl voice spoke, "This is me. Not a performer. Me. My rituals are not your rituals. And now I bury my lover in me." At this point Cohen opened what appeared to be a funeral urn, took out a large spoonful of ashes, slowly and painfully swallowed them, and then appeared to wash it all down with blood. There was some anxiety in the theater that this final act would be followed by some serious vomiting. Fortunately not. And that was it. Cohen did not take a bow. The audience did not clap.

If the intention was to illicit revulsion from the audience then Steven Cohen was successful on many levels. From a previous performance one of Cohen's reviewers remarked, "Yeah, that's brilliant. A cross-dressing gay guy rolling around in high heels kicking his feet in the air while rubbing his privates against a dead chicken."

Cohen describes his work as being heavily influenced by themes of sex and death monstrous enough to scare audiences with his fragile beauty. Performance Art can be powerful, disturbing, evocative and even beautiful. It can also be meaningless in the way the wind blowing a door open is meaningless, but that at least can be startling. If asked (I wasn't) I would have renamed the piece, "A Transvestite in Search of a Choreographer, or Attention or Just Something to do in a Small Theater on a week night. "put your heart under your feet...and walk" as a title didn't help much.

There was a lot of heated dialog after the show about the value of the work and how beauty could be a mask—an attempted cover up for self-loathing. Many find much of performance art confusing -- hard to tell what is supposed to be ironic, parodic, transparently literal, and/or what is just meaningless. I think the arts are in a hard place right now, not sure what our role is, was, can, or should be. Film and lots of television is often very, very good, but there is something about liveness that I hope we do not lose entirely (or give up entirely to sports).

Finally, is there a role then for a critic in all this? Why am I compelled to write about what I have been seeing after a long and studied career in the dance arts? And I ask myself is there anyone other than a critic who might be willing to tell us how our work affected them? And who else will take the trouble to give us insight into how we did; what we did or how we tried to do what we did, before trying to do it all over again?