

# Considerations for the Choreographic Treatment of Personal Movement Vocabulary in Community Dance Practice

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These lives of ours that press in on us must be heard. We are our own oral history. A living memoir of time. Time is downloaded into our bodies. We contain it. Not only time past and future, but time without end. We think of ourselves as closed and finite, when we are multiple and infinite.

(Winterson, 2000, pp.120-121)

Community dance today is primarily identified as a democratic, process-oriented practice generated for, with and because of community. It encompasses a broad spectrum of styles and approaches and is carried out for recreation, education, social connectivity, cultural expression, personal development and creative exploration. An eclectic field with only *community* and *dance* as its identifying feature, one of the form's leading advocates, the Foundation for Community Dance, United Kingdom, recently commissioned the framework: *Thinking Aloud: In Search of a Community Dance Framework*. Within this framework, positions about the value of participation to community development and the world of art are presented. While the community dance profession strongly acknowledges its provision of health and wellbeing, political and community development benefits, many practitioners argue that these pluses are secondary to the act of making art. Heidi Wilson, community dance practitioner, argues that the presentation of work is essential, and not simply 'an extension of the process which is the community dance experience' (Wilson, 2006).

Certainly for many organizations, particularly funding bodies, community dance is the 'everything' of Peppiatt's *Community Dance Framework* (1996) where community development is 'everything' and creative development and dance presentation is 'everything AND performance'. 'Everything's' value lies in what it can do for community development: benefits to health, increased individual and collective empowerment, access to a means of cultural

expression and building community connection. Performance, it would seem, is a much lesser objective, compounding the prevailing perception that the product, should there be one, will not be the most important aspect of participation and that the quality of the art produced should not be expected to be 'cutting edge' or 'professional'. There are practitioners (Wilson is but one), who continue to challenge this perception, but considering the art world's current confusion regarding the value of community dance performance and its status within the world of professional and amateur performance, this stance requires ongoing persistence, increased visibility within dance literature and a practical method for educating audiences.

If community dance is about making art with community, what of the artist who comes into a community with a preformed concept, who wants to make work that has 'universal' overtures: a solo that can be performed by anyone, anywhere, anytime? Where is the community in that? What are the community dance processes, the 'everything' that is so integral to community dance, when it is understood that each person is unique?

I was continually challenged by these and other questions during the development of a community dance work *My Body is an Etching*, which took place over a six month period in 2007 while the Caroline Plummer Fellow of Community Dance for the University of Otago, New Zealand. The process began with a creative concept, which was promoted to attract participants. The work was to be a solo that could be performed by almost anyone, with or without dance training.

The premise rested on the observation that each person is inscribed in ways that reflect unique experiences, individual human structure and personal preferences for movement. The performance of action is understood to be embodied or deeply etched in highly individualised ways so that no two people perform movement in precisely the same way. Personal histories, resulting from a lifetime of habit, experience, expression, physical challenges, cultural heritage and sense of place lay, resting in the bones, muscles, sinews and skin, awaiting reference.

The lines on my face and hands, the stretch marks I still wear, the scars on my body are proof that I have lived. My muscles remember things my mind has forgotten; a past of everyday activities and life-changing events is written into this body of mine. I am marked by time and experience.

(Rank, 2007)

The focus was to create a work for individuals first, then to consider that work within a community context, possibly a very large community. The solo was to be developed in such a way that it could be performed alone or in the company of others, without the performers needing to directly reference others' actions.

The participant group, collaborating for the first time on this project, consisted of ten local, voluntary, untrained dancers, the majority of whom were of European decent and over 60 years of age. Four were practicing visual artists attracted to the title of the work and the concepts behind it, eager to explore

new creative avenues. The creative development period took place over seven weeks, the group meeting for weekly workshops and an informal showing on the last week. Individuals were recruited from either of the two weekly community dance classes that had been run, articles in the free, local newspaper, or were referred by leaders of community health or leisure groups in the area. Criteria for inclusion stated that participants would meet regularly, were of reasonable fitness and would be willing to document their response to the themes and process using journals supplied.<sup>1</sup>

In the rehearsal space and as part of the hermeneutic process, we referred to action memory, theories of Gestalt psychology and print making practices.

Since Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1964, 1965), theorists have argued that our physical bodies form a frame of reference for our interaction with the world, providing the structural consistency required to form an assumed base or 'orientational center in relation to which everything else takes place' and creating a determinate stance through which place, self and circumstance are understood (Leder, 1990, p. 21). While the human body is seen as relatively secure, it is also acknowledged as a dynamic, integrated, sagacious system that incorporates bodily knowledge. It has the capacity to unconsciously perform embodied movement, the muscles remembering first, thoughts catching up later. Habitual work or play-based actions, performed without deliberation, free us to respond to new or unexpected conditions, safe from the tyranny of hyper awareness and its debilitating effects. Hence, repetitious actions fall into the gestalt of our experience, disappearing from notice, but silently informing our every move.<sup>2</sup> Consider a step forward, generally performed without conscious reflection, but here analysed by one participant:

Find a point of balance  
Tip to the end of it  
Overbalance, catch yourself  
Two feet, one foot  
A sense of danger<sup>3</sup>

In our attempt to recall actions such as these, we rely on imagery and muscular memory, assuming that an action once performed and frequently repeated is preserved within the neuromuscular pathways of the body. It is a subject of intrigue for many areas, particularly the physical sciences.

In a recent article for the New Yorker, professor of clinical neurology and clinical psychiatry, Oliver Sacks (2007, pp. 100-112) wrote of Clive Wearing an eminent musicologist who in his mid-forties suffered permanent amnesia of a kind that disallowed memory of current events for longer than 3 seconds. In addition, his long-term memory was slowly erased so that Clive was unable to live in anything but the present. Despite this terrible state of 'being awake', in only 3 second lots, Clive was able to play complex compositions, his body remembering what his conscious brain could not. Sacks calls this implicit memory, something that is a result of intense practice, revision and physical memory. Gestalt psychologists refer to it as a 'memory for action':

[P]eople often remember output elements. They perform actions in order to change their environment and to reach their action goals, and the memory of these actions is a by-product of performing them. ... Looking more systematically at the remembrance of actions, we are able to find further peculiarities at the *retrieval stage*. From introspection, a *strong retrieval intention* does not seem to be necessary to retrieve self performed events. Self-performed actions often spontaneously pop into conscious memory. Retrieving action is therefore experienced as relatively effortless. In addition, actions often have to be remembered outside of memory tasks, that is, during the *monitoring* of the execution of one's own behaviour. During performance it is always necessary to remember one's own actions in order to keep track of things that one has done and that one has yet to do.

(Zimmer et al, 2001, pp. 4-5)

But it is not as simple as one deep groove, a permanent etching that remains unaltered. All etchings wear out over time; prints that result from the etching process are essentially reproductions. Frequently performed movements create traces within the body. Actions, which have been performed successfully, that is, with the least amount of stress, form ideals towards which an individual aims each time that particular movement is required. However, our attempts at exact recreation are overwhelmingly inexact. The ideal trace is transformed by multiple variations of quality, speed, posture and intent – light filaments, radiating from the etching, similar to the original but not the same. This is supported by dancer-academic Heidi Gilpin, who postulates that the very attempt to recall deeply etched movement causes its very disappearance. Gilpin described the dilemma when she wrote 'the image etched in memory is transformed the moment we attempt to reexamine it' (Gilpin, 1996, p 106). Thus memory will always be marked by disappearance.



I tilt my torso forward, catch my weight with one foot  
Back to centre  
Repeat  
Where does the foot land?  
Not in exactly the same place each time.  
I land heavily on my heel first each time  
The impressions surprise me<sup>4</sup>

In the making of *My Body is an Etching* we were well aware of the contradictions inherent in the remembrance of past action, and accepted that what we would find would be approximations. We accepted the difficulties because ours was a creative, not scientific venture that valued the attempt at close recreation, which heightened self-awareness and enabled creative possibilities to emerge.

We explored fundamental movements and gestures: looking, walking, sleeping, rolling, balancing, losing and regaining balance as well as movement sub groups – the shifts of balance before and after a fall, a walk or roll. The participants found much to comment upon. Many found the reflection on and repetition of everyday activity quite difficult and at times emotional.

Our sleeping positions, which are part of the dance make me feel very aware of that movement. When I move into one of my positions whilst in my bed at night I feel that I am dancing into the next position. As I roll into the next position, I am actively aware. I feel the movement and know the movement. I am dancing in my sleep. I have comfort in that.<sup>5</sup>

There are different ways to roll. Rolling moves the body out of its normal context – out of its normal grooves. It makes you more aware of your body. You don't take movement for granted, as in walking.<sup>6</sup>

Slow, slow roll. Makes me weep – suddenly aware of poor old work-horse of a body – doesn't get much love or attention, is expected to keep on going. Good thing in some ways, not in others. Never got much enjoyment from it – more satisfaction from getting things done. Never really flows in movement – fly with words instead.... Developing pleasure in movement.<sup>7</sup>

Each participant in this project was considered (and was encouraged to consider themselves) an expert who skillfully performs a range of actions each day. Through the quotes above the participants speak of a heightened consciousness of everyday movements and developing confidence in reproducing movement consciously – a thing greatly desired in the creative process. However, during the choreography of the dance, this natural movement, newly remembered, is taken completely outside the contextual parameters of its initial construction. We then produce a recreation of a recreation. Work or play-based embodied actions that were once reproduced are now placed in a choreographic context and transformed.

So, given that this is a community dance work, where are the ethics of manipulation? Whose vision or use of movement is paramount? How do the participants respond to this manipulation?

What is it like to be directed? I don't take easily to being told what to do with my body. In normal life there are many, many small ways of subverting control. But here, I willingly offer to be guided – I wouldn't know what to do otherwise – I wouldn't want to lead myself – nothing would happen. Or something else would happen, not this. To allow one's body to become directed is different from following the directions of others in your own way. To work one's body in accord with others, but in your own way, is a complex

compromise. Especially the way in which I do things (for some other purpose). It's not unpleasurable however – just a strange compromise.<sup>8</sup>

### **Choreography and control in community dance**

Underlying much contemporary community dance endeavor is a drive for access, visibility and individual creative development. Ideally, participants are 'empowered' to reveal individual interests, qualities and strengths which can become located in some way in the work produced. But empowerment implies a release from another state. Who coordinates the release? What are the conditions for its occurrence? How much control is required to effectively guide newly empowered participants through creative development to the presentation of a new work?

During the development of a new work, processes and people are managed. Contributions are situated within frameworks, whether operational or creative. Some ideas are adopted, others aren't, since in the interest of producing the best work possible, an equal representation of views is not always possible or desirable. For *My Body is an Etching* the choreographer/researcher led the exploration, generating initial ideas, which were consequently developed in collaboration with the participants. Individual movements and habitual movement patterns were recalled and reconstructed with an effort to stay as close to the ideal traces as possible. But to leave them as such would be to maintain their status as work or play. As art, they required context, purpose, form, light and shade, which eventually transforms the functional actions, to a creative statement. And so, we played with the speed of a lazy roll, the dynamics of a fitful sleep, the nuances of balance, exaggerating some elements, minimizing others. We considered the frames of performance. We created a structure so that a sense of the natural could be maintained or imagined, although we were aware that we left it behind long ago.

How much of the individual's movement traces remain after such a process? Possibly a great deal, but found as a new trace quite separate to the first, not as a replacement, but an adjunct to the previous state of play.

There were three distinct drives at work in this project which created an ongoing challenge for the choreographer/researcher/community dance practitioner: the drive to produce a work that was engaging, challenging and memorable; the research ambition to discover that which is unique, consistent and illuminating; and the community dance purpose to ensure a valuable movement experience, reflecting the life experience of its participants.

The three aspects were interwoven in the making of *My Body is an Etching*, a hermeneutic process of ever developing understandings within cycles of reflection and re-evaluation. Each cycle referred to the ones preceding and incorporated all contributions from the community participants so that their voices were interwoven with that of the researcher's. In this way the work became inclusive and empowering. Guided by new understandings, and a growing sense of collective purpose, a community emerged and with it a

dance which responded to the individuals in that group, including the researcher.

When the *My Body is an Etching* solos were performed simultaneously, in the wild environment of Allen's Beach, the sense of community became tangible. The energies and spatial territories of the individual solos aligned and as a result the performers generated a remarkably strong, focused dance work. The space, the people and the dance worked harmoniously to reveal a community of individuals who shared a particular space and time together which will never be forgotten.

The key to this process is the navigating of the 'reef'. The choreographer becomes more involved in the rhythms of the performance... Each journey over a reef gives you the view of that journey. This is the responsibility of the choreographer who navigates this journey. This navigation is what brings the 'reef' into view and the choreographer is responsible for that view.

(Finnan, 2006)

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Fitness here referred to the lack of serious medical conditions, as determined by a medical practitioner and not the presence of intellectual, mental health or physical disabilities. Participation from either group was welcomed, though the former was on condition of a doctor's approval.

<sup>2</sup> Consciousness of everyday actions may be reawakened in times of stress. Age, illness and injury may necessitate more deliberation in movements that were once taken for granted, and new ways of accomplishing old tasks may need to be negotiated.

<sup>3</sup> Participant 1, Journal Entry from visual diary, 2007

<sup>4</sup> Choreographer's journal 25 August 2007

<sup>5</sup> Participant 1, Journal Entry from visual diary, 2007

<sup>6</sup> Participant 2, journal entry from visual diary 2007

<sup>7</sup> Participant 4, Journal Entry from visual diary, 2007

<sup>8</sup> Participant 3, Journal Entry from visual diary, 2007

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## Biographical statement

**Katrina Rank** trained at the Australian Ballet School and performed with The Dancers Company, the Victorian State Opera and Northern Ballet Theatre (UK). She was awarded her doctorate in 2000, investigating untrained dancers in the study of narrative applications in dance performance. Katrina was a Caroline Plummer Fellow of Otago University, New Zealand in 2007, and in 2009, was artist in residence at Darebin, delivering a dance-film *Yours Truly*, an installation project for dancers with disabilities. In 2006 Katrina created Dance in Schools, a performance program and workshops for primary and secondary schools within Melbourne and regional Victoria. She is a teaching artist for the Royal Children's Hospital's Festival of Healthy Living (Ashwood and Reservoir projects), The Victorian Arts Centre and The Song Room, and is currently Education and Training Manager, Ausdance Victoria.