

Pure Research Report - December 2007:

Kinesthetic Transference in Performance

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What did we do?

Kate Digby, Denise Fujiwara, myself (Erika Batdorf) and Matthew Romantini worked in the Glen Morris Studio for three full days on principles that we thought would increase our ability as movers (dancers and/or physical actors) to 'move' an audience. Suzanne Jaeger also observed the first two days fully and took notes. We had two observers for one full day.

These principles we were examining are universal to most performers in many ways, but we agreed to investigate as honestly as possible whether we were doing what we said we were trying to do and whether it was effective.

My technique "Kinesthetic Transference", was for me, a primary reference guide. I will not expound on this particular technique at this time, as this article would become about something else and not specifically what this three-day event was primarily about.

Kate Digby is trained in this technique, Matthew has studied it with me somewhat and Denise and I have shared a dialogue over the past few years now about how our approaches to performance are similar and different. We have even spent a little time trying to 'teach' each other aspects of our differing and yet similar techniques. Denise and I are aware that we have the same goals, see similar attempts in each other's work to achieve these goals and have been trying to learn from one another.

We spent the time warming up and then performing excerpts from our own work and from our repertoires, so that we did not spend time 'choreographing'. The work that each artist presented differed in many ways but all of it was a form of expression through movement. For this experiment we eliminated music, text, costume, lighting and set. We then gave honest feedback about what we saw and tried to determine what aspects of practice make one more compelling and/or moving. We gave each other feedback and decided that Denise, Kate and myself would perform two excerpts twice each from various styles of work, from very choreographed to very sparse, direct eye contact with the audience and no eye contact with the audience.

We then performed these in front of an audience. We had questionnaires for them and we also videotaped the audience response from behind the performers. The first time they saw the piece the audience was simply to watch and answer was it compelling or moving? And if so, what was compelling and what was moving?

The second time they watched the same piece, they were to place their hand on their chest (mainly to avoid influencing others with hands going up in front of other audience members) and move the hand away from the chest when they were either moved or compelled.

At the end of the evening we had a discussion with the audience about what they had seen.

What did we learn?

After the performance and before analyzing the audience feedback, we consulted with each other and came up with some principles based on this event and our previous experience, that seem to be critical and fundamental to being moving and compelling through solely physical work on stage.

The words that we chose appear extraordinarily simple and yet in practice are extraordinarily difficult. We realize as we state these principles, that describing them becomes challenging, as they refer to such a visceral and three-dimensional experience, that words diminish their reality. We may define these- but even these definitions can become limiting.

Here are some things that we agreed are required:

Awareness-

One must feel oneself fully. The mind/body connection must be very developed. This includes awareness of many levels of the body. One must also then be present in the moment and in the practice of continually renewing that presence. One is not necessarily aware of all of the following things simultaneously at all times. I often use the metaphor of juggling- as one is moving through a continually changing landscape of awareness.

This awareness then must include:

Awareness of breath

Awareness of gravity

Awareness of blood

Awareness of internal viscera including a relationship to the nervous system which some of us felt as 'nerve' sensation, some as inextricably linked to the blood system, some as spinal fluid...

Awareness of oneness, the body as one thing to begin and then the body/breath/senses/audience as one thing

Fujiwara later added awareness of thoughts and emotions.

Digby:

Ok...so I don't know that I disagree with this, but I'm not sure I agree either. There are definitely moments where I feel I am KT-ing during which I don't know that I am holding all of the awareness listed above. I think my experience is more that the potential for awareness of all these things is there, but that the actual awareness in the moment is shifting. But it is hard to know really, because I think the awareness that does exist at least in the places where it is now more comfortable is sub-conscious. So typically I am only consciously aware of being aware of the system or part of the body that is most challenging to be aware of at that time (in my life/that day/in that character/emotional state....)

Batodorf's response:

I agree!

This lead to a discussion of {from the language of Butoh} the need for chaos... and the ability, perhaps because of the awareness of oneness, to allow chaos.

Digby articulated it better:

Another place where my understanding feels slightly different...what I experience at times is the chaos or disentanglement or boundary-less ness of oneself, which to me is actually the same as the oneness.

Batdorf's Response:

Also agree I have a similiar experience – well said Kate!

My language for something that may be related to this, but is likely something different is 'disentanglement' and specificity.

The following things are also critical and I will not define them here because they exist IN the work profoundly as concrete practice and yet mystically arise OUT of a disciplined practice like the inevitability of a plant from a seed that has been well nurtured. They are for me both practices and discovered gems, chosen highly consciously and yet completely out of my control. Perhaps I can say that I practice the art of inviting them in and making the soil fertile for their arrival...

Selflessness/egolessness

Love

Presence and Detachment

(My phrase for this might be:

Performance is unrequited love, but still loving all the more.)

Digby: perfect!

Transformation-

This is a more technical element on one hand and yet also mystical and deeply profound. Oneness with the other, becoming the other, dissolving into the oneness...as I sometimes say, if you are not changing yourself in the work, how do you expect to change the audience?

We discovered that transitions are almost always compelling for an audience... because something shifts and it awakens the audience AND because shifting requires heightened awareness for the performer and breath and gravity tend to also shift.

For some of us integration of vocal work was critical to the body becoming fully present with the mind and oneness to be complete.

For me I know that -

when I begin to perform, I attempt to fall and open and I continue to fall and open, fall and open, fall and open... this has resonance in the life of the diaphragm, heart/blood system, relationship to gravity... it is allowing the organic nature of the body whilst trying to gently steer.

Digby: I'm with you until this last phrase...because what is here sounds even more directed than it feels. Like it's maybe more like experiencing the organic nature of the body and all its possibilities, waiting for the 'choreographically/directorially intended' "essence" to appear and choosing to allow that one to prevail.

Batdorf: This may be a difference in how we experience it... cause I do feel as if I am steering- otherwise- how would I end up in the same place each show? Like guiding water that is falling through a particular channel... but the falling water is beyond my consciousness.

Digby: I think we are probably meaning something very similar. But if I think of it as steering, then I will jump the gun and not listen for the organic impulse – and for me that is the death of everything potentially authentic/moving/compelling. Perhaps with more experience/trust/faith/self-knowledge I will be able to steer with enough detachment that it isn't pushing, but as I am right now that doesn't seem to work for me.

Fujiwara: My experience of this relates to the repertoire and how it was created. When I'm doing work that is closer to contemporary dance, my experience is closer to Kate's. When I'm doing butoh and my more recent choreography, my experience is closer to what Erika has articulated.

We all felt the cyclical relationship between these things and Denise said that we should write this as a circular diagram that we thought might go something like this:

If you dissolve the self and investigate/feel your breath and if you investigate and feel the breath you must then investigate gravity and if you investigate gravity, you must investigate selflessness and if you succeed, you will then perhaps investigate love if you investigate love you will investigate oneness and you will dissolve...

I personally learned a TON... I am grateful to my colleagues; Kate- as a modern dancer and choreographer, brought a huge and dynamic relationship to the muscular skeletal system that I have been less engaged with on becoming more of a writer/actor/director and a sophisticated understanding of Kinesthetic Transference. Denise brought her extensive, experience and knowledge of Butoh and a wisdom and love that I have grown to cherish and continues to surprise me. Matthew brought an amazingly astute and helpful eye and bravery, Suzanne brought a quiet and completely trustworthy, non-judgmental and yet critical eye and the audience brought such attentiveness, and later observations and opinions.

I am so thankful to Nightswimming and the Graduate Centre for this opportunity. It is an example to all academic environments with research communities attached to Fine Arts departments of how real experiential research could be so much more alive and integrated into real arts practice within an academic environment.

Each of us involved grew tremendously and this will go back into our performance work, our teaching and each of our own continued research in this area.

Digby: Yes!!!