

# Exposing Dialogue Through Dance

By Gail Lotenberg

*A report on a workshop conducted as part of Nightswimming's Pure Research program, in association with Contemporary Arts, Simon Fraser University. Conducted at SFU's Woodward's Centre, in Vancouver, June 9-12, 2012.*

## I. BACKGROUND

As Artistic Director of LINK Dance Foundation, my work is to generate cross-disciplinary dialogues in the making of dance. Since 2006, LINK Dance has collaborated with scientists, legal scholars, restorative justice advocates, and the public to make performances within a dialogical environment. The goal of these projects is inherently political—to take ideas generated by people outside the world of dance, and to expand and translate them into the language of the body to make them more universal and visceral. Collaborators in all previous projects contributed meaningfully to the research we conducted. However, when I brought my work and vision to Pure Research, my aim was to uncover ways to make research dialogues more pronounced in the performance context, not just the research context, of a piece.

My overriding desire was to see if I could find ways to shine a light on the content of our dialogues, and thus make them observable, rather than bury them within the research phase (therefore hidden from the audience and known only to the creators). But in doing this, I didn't want to create something that looked and felt like a lecture demonstration.

## II. METHODS

To reveal the dialogues more overtly within a dance, I needed to begin by finding ways to incorporate verbal language into movement-based scenarios that would allow language and movement to sit comfortably together. I needed to experiment with ways to invent a frame for dialogues; frames in which the movement remained core as a means of speaking the content of the piece, but didn't bump up against the spoken dialogical elements to make it an awkward fit.

After much discussion with Brian Quirt and D.D. Kugler prior to the actual days in studio, I entered Pure Research with the question: *What are some spoken word and dance scores that allow text and movement to sit in a comfortable relationship with one another.* It was through these scores that I might be able to engineer the delivery of dialogical process creatively.



During Pure Research I made discoveries about characteristics which I could see served my intended outcome. I responded to word scores that were any or all of the following:

- innovative in the sense that they could illuminate the collaborators' thinking on a subject while not relying solely on spoken language;
- action-oriented in that they called on movement implicitly, and;
- familiar in that they offered common ground between audience and performer, which necessitated little explanation and provided a tempting invitation to the audience to participate because it was recognizable.



### III. FINDINGS

Over the three days of Pure Research I realized that at the core of what I was investigating I was really seeking ways to re-compose the context of performance. Dialogical process requires that, at some point, everyone in the room is both witness and witnessed. In our research, we needed to be able to shift the focus in a performance space repeatedly and fluidly. Why was this important? Because dialogues happen when there is participation. I didn't want them to be just witnessed on display as in traditional performance. All people in the room have to have the ability to be listened to and therefore interventions, without bogging down the performance, offer authenticity. That is what I was searching for.

To facilitate this pursuit, I had to create a sample (albeit imperfect) performance situation. I invited many performing arts students from SFU to serve as a sample audience, and invited some select "experts" to represent the subject matter of our dialogue. Due to ongoing research with advocates from the field of Restorative Justice, I invited two people from this field into Pure Research. Our goal was to create something like a real performance environment to research the methods of creating dance (at least the forms of a dance) that was grounded in dialogue and audience participation. With these various roles in place, we were ready to begin.



#### A. The Talking Piece

A discovery we made right away was that any forms we invent for a performance should be thematically tied to the subject matter of the dialogue. In our collaboration with Restorative Justice advocates, the form that surfaced right away was Circle Process. This dialogical form is enacted in many Restorative Justice proceedings and it requires use of a talking piece. When someone is holding a talking piece in a Circle, (s)he is the only person speaking and all eyes are on her. The talking piece is passed around, and offers the speaker full focus. By using this procedure, we had an organizing principle that inherently directed the attention of the audience from one moment and location to the next.

As a means of inviting participation, the talking piece provided a useful springboard to action. The person holding the talking piece was implicitly the focal point at any given moment and could summon the authority of that position to shift a static audience into a group of movers in a game. This discovery created the concept of pliability in composing a future production.

#### B. Well-known Word Scores

As I mentioned above, the word scores that really piqued my interest tended to call movement to themselves implicitly and to draw on familiarity. Childrens' games surfaced repeatedly to fit those two requirements. I describe

some scenarios below with particular focus on their success in being able to effectively recompose the performance space and to promote engagement between audience and performers.

### **B1. Musical Chairs**

Musical Chairs is a game that calls action to itself. It is entertaining to watch for a while and has musical accompaniment which is well-suited to dance. It offers the ability to shift the focal point in a theatrical situation from known performers to an extemporaneous collection of people moving to centre stage to begin walking around a circle of chairs to musical accompaniment while competing to find a chair when that music ceases. So what happens next? Well, the answer to that could be “anything.” It could mean that the people in the centre become our focus for a new section to begin. But that is not the only option; it could also be that we get a certain number of chairs into the middle of the room and then ask the people who shaped that ring of chairs to please take a seat elsewhere in the room to re-join the audience, so that a composed sequence of dance could move into that focal area. The discovery is that Musical Chairs shifts the environment and theatrical focus and invites audience participation to that end.

### **B2. Simon Says**

In the same style of spoken word scores as Musical Chairs, “Simon Says” has the ability to direct the audience to action with simple instructions that many immediately found familiar. “Simon Says” was more limited in many ways but offered an interesting layer that had some sinister undertones. The game itself is inherently manipulative because the caller can get the players to do things that feel right by instinct but not right according to the rules of the game (just by covertly leaving out the words “Simon Says”). This disconnect between impulse and rules, we found, mirrored aspects of the punitive justice system where, for instance, your instinct to give back something that you stole during a robbery, is not able to be enacted because it becomes incriminating evidence against you.

### **B3. Red Light Green Light**

As the caller in this game, I was constantly surprised by how many fabulous ways the extemporaneous group of performers re-composed the space behind me every time I turned around to say “Red Light Green Light 1, 2, 3.” An extrapolation from this discovery is that the audience who was on my side of the game could be asked to turn away with me on each round so that when we all looked back together, we would be surprised by the creative variances the performers offered on each round of the game. And then what if, once only two of the performers were officially still “in” the game, what if I had turned my back suddenly on the audience and said “Red Light Green Light 1, 2, 3”? The audience is now in a position to act. The cue to change roles is embedded within the game itself because those who had been caught moving at the end of each previous round, were sent “out” of the playing field and were gathering on the watchers side of the game. Suddenly with all but two of players on that side and already primed to react, they would act, thus cueing the audience to also engage in the active role. My final call might return to the words “Simon Says, everyone please place your chair in a neat set of rows.” When I turn around, I will have enacted a re-composed performance environment whereby the audience uses their active role to arrange seating for the show to go on.

I seek this type of flexibility in my relationship with the audience. It allows the context of the room to alter repeatedly and as it does, for the focus of the room to shift organically.

### **B4. Square Dance**

The Square Dance is a fun and participatory dance form that uses spoken word to inform participants what actions to do in order to dance a pre-composed sequence of movement. Its purpose is to create intricate choreography and interesting formation changes with nearly no rehearsal time. Drawn by our objective to enlist spoken word scores that called action to themselves, the Square Dance was a front runner.

What resulted from our explorations were two quite different outcomes. As an installation piece, when there is time beforehand to teach a group of people the basic moves of the dance, a Square Dance sequence could be enacted for the participants to dance. What was innovative was the concept that with each repetition of the sequence of movements, a changing configuration of word Calls could be used by the caller to spur those

movements to action. These word variations would offer a texture of interpretation that served to impart a message in a non-didactic form. So imagine watching a Square Dance made from standard calls (i.e. Swing your partner, Right hand star, Do Si Do, etc.). Once composed and learned, the caller could alter the language of these instructions. The altered language would serve as subtext; for example, “Greet your Corner” could become “Confront your Corner Eye to Eye”; “Meet your Partner” becomes “Face Off your Partner.” The enactment of the dance with the shifting image pool (derived from the caller’s shifting words) implants a storyline, engages conflict, and perhaps even resolves that conflict with only the embodied feeling of the movement changing, not the form of it.

In a more rigorous performance environment, where the flow of the performance could be significantly halted by a learning process of the dance in front of a waiting audience, this Square Dance exploration could possibly still be used by having each of the performers select a partner from the audience and lead that partner through the sequence of the Square Dance. Because of the repetitive nature of the form and the calls that prompt the movement, the dance might work without rehearsal. With the pushing and prodding by the trained partner, each couple could likely enact the dance once, twice... and eventually as the participants gain familiarity, a more subversive word score could begin to supplant the familiar calls, thus adding that texture of subtext and meaning described above.

A final discovery about the Square Dance is that the trained dancers and the volunteers in Pure Research did the movement with almost equal ability in terms of their embodied reaction to the calls. Square Dances are inherently democratic in that it is the community that makes the form work. As a choreographed section for performance, it enables the collaborators in a cross-disciplinary production, and even unsuspecting audience members (after a few repetitions), to perform with trained dancers that gives authority to no one.

### **C. Innovating Word Scores**

Aside from the games and the spoken word scores that are action-oriented and familiar, we did play with other forms that were more inventive. One involved having a speaker talk quietly near a partner whose task was to dance. The arrangement created a situation where the audience’s only access to the words being delivered quietly by the speaker was through the body of the dancer. The words eventually got louder so that the audience could access the words through their primary medium of spoken language. Then the necessity of the dancer came into question. We tried a number of things to take the relationship to a satisfying conclusion. One was to have the dancer become the first author once the auditory level of the speaker reached a threshold level; then the dancer’s role remained essential. Another solution was to understand the relationship theatrically between the speaker and the mover so the dependence between them would have a trajectory to follow towards conclusion once the speaker could be heard. This concept has rich possibilities.

One other word score that offered interesting options, especially in an installation situation, was using a few repeating phrases of dance that are choreographed ahead of time and to have these dances cycle through a pattern so that the audience sees each movement study numerous times in the same repeating order, but always accompanied by a different speaker speaking their views on the subject area of the dialogue. The speakers are voluntary and their words impromptu; the movement is not. What was interesting was that when the volunteer speakers were speaking they had a time maximum that was equivalent to the duration of each phrase of movement. Seeing the same movement phrases repeating, accompanied by random and varied spoken texts was interesting because it offered so many unplanned points of connection between words and movement. We learned that it was most effective when we had the speakers speak in ways that limited them from being the focal point, such as having them turn away from the audience.

Finally, it was interesting to play with the usual forms of spoken language that occur within a work room when creating dance but done quietly; for instance when two dancers quietly talked and worked out their choreographic material upstage while two Restorative Justice experts sat in chairs downstage talking about the subject matter of the piece. I drifted back and forth between the two, which DD Kugler commented was most interesting because it revealed how both aspects of the collaboration were being influenced and redirected by my interventions, because of what I was drawing from one arena and taking into the other arena. What he witnessed was how this dialectic was being guided and shaped through my intervention and vision.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

For every discovery we made during our time together in Pure Research, there are many more untapped and unanswered questions. Still I found some ideas through our work together that reveal to me ways I can continue to work in dialogical creation with methods to express the dialogue in a theatrically interesting language.

The next chapter for some of this work will be to take these ideas into an Artist Residency spearheaded by 350.org in New York during October 2012 at the Blue Mountain Centre. A group of artists with activist tendencies will all gather for two-and-half weeks to explore ways to engage a large public audience in creative solutions to climate change. We are collectively drawn to the challenge of meeting the influence and power of fossil fuel companies with the influence and power of large numbers of people united creatively and passionately, in collective action.



I will finish this report by expressing my gratitude to Nightswimming and to Simon Fraser University for allowing me to dive into some of my inquiries and into many of my fears. I am thankful for the chance to illuminate my path through rigorous investigation rather than through intuition, which often leads back, over and over again, to the same solutions.

#### PARTICIPANTS

##### **LINK Dance**

- Gail Lotenberg, Artistic Director
- Cara Siu, Senior Creative Collaborator
- Deanna Peters, Creative Collaborator

##### **SFU/Nightswimming**

- D.D. Kugler, Dramaturg, Simon Fraser University
- Brian Quirt, Artistic Director, Nightswimming
- Rupal Shah, Producer, Nightswimming
- Rachel Steinberg, Intern Dramaturg, Nightswimming

##### **Volunteer Participants:**

- Brenda Morrison, Director of the Centre for Restorative Justice
- Robert Seto, Restorative Justice practitioner
- Ruth McIntosh, professional actor

##### **Students:**

- Marcela Caceres
- Aryo Khakpour
- Kaylin Metchie
- Chu-Lynne Ng
- Jenni Rempel
- Shannon Wong
- June Fukumura
- Minah Lee
- Steffi Munshaw
- Conor Wylie



For more information about LINK Dance: [www.linkdance.ca/](http://www.linkdance.ca/)  
 For more information about SFU Contemporary Arts: [www.sfu.ca/sca/](http://www.sfu.ca/sca/)  
 For more information about Nightswimming: [www.nightswimmingtheatre.com](http://www.nightswimmingtheatre.com)