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PRACTISING DANCE HISTORY

Reflections on the shared processes of dance historians and dance makers

Alexandra Carter

This investigation is in part a response to the ‘turn to practice’ that has captured the attention of many writers, practitioners and funders in research and education. The activity of ‘practice’ has historically been seen as a binary opposite to that of ‘writing’ with the hierarchical value which binaries entail. In the dance profession, words have been viewed with great suspicion; contrarily, in academia, practice has been a second-class activity. Recently, however, there has been an acceptance of practice as legitimate research. The particular field of interest, in Britain, has been in what kinds of practice can be recognized as research; what, therefore, constitutes ‘research’ and how does ‘practice’ theorise its research? In this paper, I want to take an alternative perspective and ask to what extent can ‘theorising’ in the writing act be likened to practice? Most specifically, how can the theorising of the historian embedded within the traditional writing act be likened to the ‘practice-act’ of choreography? The aim of the paper is to extend the arguments made by my colleague Susan Melrose (2005a; 2005b) in her exploration of the shared processes of the expert writer and expert practitioner. As she claims, ‘they could dance well together, if they could only learn to be more transparent and accountable about all of the processes involved in their different sorts of expertise’ (2005a). Nevertheless, although I will be attempting to expose shared processes, there is no attempt to dilute the highly distinctive expertise necessary for each kind of activity.

The turn to practice has, arguably, rendered the traditional writing act as something solid, conservative, almost old-fashioned. I was struck by the comments of a critic, made during a public interview with a British choreographer. He envied her the freedom of her practice, for he was bound by rules and she was not; she was creative, he could not be. He positioned himself in a subordinate role – not an unusual one in commonsense perceptions of critics – but one which here was based on the very nature of the practice/writing divide. However, although each activity deploys different kinds of skills and they have obviously different outcomes, the aim here is to demonstrate that far more is

shared than is suggested by the historical dichotomy of practice and writing. As well as pointing the way to how the expert historiographer and practitioner might ‘dance well together’ the further aims of this paper are threefold. First, to dispel some possible misconceptions about the process and act of writing about the past; second, as a result, to use these arguments as a way of encouraging students and anyone else new to the field who are apprehensive of the writing act and third, to help those of us who do engage with historiography to celebrate it as a creative, imaginative act of practice.¹

In dance, analogies between writing and practice have been well made. Stinson (1994, 2006) discusses the notion of ‘research as choreography’ and Hanstein makes a similarly neat parallel between the traditional scholarly research process and the choreographic process. We can also accept these parallels in relation to the specific act of writing history. Both historiography and dance making involve research of some kind; both involve a kind of theorising (though I will leave others at this conference to tease that out more fully how practitioners ‘theorise’). Both give shape to material. Further connections are made by Susan Foster who reminds us not only that the historian is engaged in bodily activity but also of the difficulties the historian has in accessing and recording the ‘bodily writing’ of the past (1995:4). In summary, the historiographer theorises about the past and the choreographer practises in the present but choreographers also theorise from the past and the historian practises in the present. At this most simple level, both activities are, therefore, theorising and practising. But there are more complex aspects of the historian’s practice, which they also share with the artist practitioner. I will explore two key concepts which appear central to the act of dance making and apply them to the act of dance history-making. These are, creativity and one of its component processes, intuition.

Creativity is all around us. Its meaning is culture-bound and it is, as Negus and Pickering (2004: vii) argue, ‘a way of according cultural value’. It is

applied to business people, to advertising executives, to teachers, even to scientists. Most specifically, it is deemed central to the artistic process. It is rarely an attribute overtly applied to historians. In fact, to be described as a creative dance historian might suggest that you are not a very good one, that you are somehow ‘making something up’. But of course, a historian does actually ‘make things up’. The notion that historians ‘make up’ or construct the past has long been in circulation and debates about history as ‘fact’ or history as a construct are ongoing (see Hamilton 1996 for a summary). But as Geertz (1993) argues in relation to anthropological writings, historiographies are also “‘something made”, “something fashioned” – the original meaning of *fictio* – not that they are false, unfactual’ (1993: 15). It is in this sense that historians are, as Jenkins and others claim, ‘writers of fiction’ (1991:10) for they make, through turning past phenomena into narrative form, stories about the past (see Muntz in Bentley for discussion of narrative in historiography). That very different stories can be told about apparently the very same historical moment is now fully acknowledged.

The attribution of creativity might be applied to any research endeavour: framing the problems; identifying the sources; collecting and structuring material and speculating on ‘answers’. Specifically, Husbands (1996: 61) argues that ‘questions about the past inevitably presuppose an act of creative imagination’ for so much concerning the past ‘is never completely captured in the evidence left behind’. It is, however, in the notion of making-up history, that the fundamental creativity of historiography resides. To pursue this argument further, it is in the very language that the historian uses in the writing act itself which ‘makes’ the history. In a detailed analysis of a piece of prose by A.J.P. Taylor, Hayden White proves his point that

Even in the simplest prose discourse, and even in one in which the object of representation is intended to be nothing but fact, the use of language itself projects a level of secondary meaning below or behind the phenomenon being “described”. . . this figurative level is produced by a constructive process, poetic in nature, which prepares the reader of the text more

or less subconsciously to receive *both* the description of facts and their explanation as plausible.’²

(White 1978: 110)

Today, we know that the use of language as projecting a ‘level of meaning below or behind’ phenomena might be construed as problematic. However, Hamilton (1996: 21) confirms that ‘our convincing *use* of the rhetorical language is what matters, compelling the reader’s agreement through rhetorical skill’. ‘The justification’, he says, ‘of an interpretation is lodged in its expression’. Munslow (1997:6) likewise argues that ‘because of the central role of language in the construction of knowledge, our historical understanding is as much a product of *how* we write as well as *what* we write’. Jenkins (1991: 23) offers examples of literary style the historian might deploy. They might write ‘polemically, discursively, flamboyantly, pedantically....’ Mostly, they must write persuasively in order to convince their readers, for as Shakespeare says through the words of Venus to Adonis, if you ‘bid me discourse, I will enchant thine ear’ (line 145).

This notion of the making up of history in the making up of language is of particular interest to dance historians for we are, in our writing, ‘making up’ the dances, the performance contexts, the choreographic motivations, to which we longer have access – or, even if we do – giving them another life on the page. That life, speculative though it may be, exists in our use of language. It is for this reason, I argue, that we should value the dance history texts of the past even when the descriptions therein seem misconceived or the judgements flawed. As White (1978: 118) argued, ‘it is to the power of the constructive imagination of . . . classic writers that we pay tribute when we honour their works as models of the historian’s craft long after we have ceased to credit their learning or the specific explanations that they offered . . . when a great work of historiography . . . has become outdated, it is reborn into art’. Whether describing dances, or offering explanations for their significance, or writing biography, or discerning relationships between dance and culture, the dance historian has a glorious canvas on which to paint the picture of their arguments. Though new critical interpretations supersede old or unacknowledged ones, let us not

abandon the old histories of dance. As we value the dances of the past for their artistic worth, let us also value, and encourage our students to value, the written texts of the past for how they present the creative dimension of the historian's art.

One of the key strands of this creative dimension is the exploitation of the intuitive moment. What is intuition? As in the good old days of feminism when theorising arose from women's experience in order to generalise from the particular, let us start with experience. I sit at my keyboard, at the very moment of writing this text, and in front of me is a conviction that I have an argument. I say in front of me, because I have not yet caught up with what that argument is. I cannot see the logical steps to it; do not even have the firm evidence. I just 'know' it. Even in the text-bound, writerly act, as it converges with the physical act of hitting the computer keys, I 'sense' something. As Stinson (1994, 2006) reflects, writing a scholarly paper is a messy act, an entry into the unknown. It is this as yet 'unknown' that we might call intuition.

There is a mass of philosophical, psychological, pedagogical and popular writing, over centuries, on this topic. Rather than enter the morass, far beyond the remit of this paper, but in order to draw parallels between processes in art-making and historiography, I consulted a text on music. Here, Swanwick (1994) argues for the interplay of intuition and analysis in the process of musical understanding. Drawing on writings from philosophy (Kant), aesthetics (Croce) and psychology (Bruner), he offers the summary that 'intuitive knowledge is ... central to all knowledge, the medial exchange between sense and significance' (1994: 31). It is, and I cite one further characterisation from many hundreds, 'immediate insight without observation or reason' (Myers 2002: 1) – though it might also be argued that intuition is observation and reason that has simply been forgotten or, as Graeme Miller suggests, that it is 'compressed knowledge' (Miller in Bannerman *et al* 2006: 39).

Susan Melrose's work on practice as research refers consistently to what she calls 'expert intuition'. She also acknowledges that she, as a writer, 'operates consistently on the basis of ... writerly intuitions ... which seem to emerge from a nowhere of writing'

(2005a). Melrose (2005c) argues that certain writers have 'developed their own theoretical insight on the basis of expert intuitions *before* they proceed to recuperate these in terms provided by conventional research ... procedures'. She cites Bourdieu's 'habitas' and Jameson's 'cognitive mapping' as examples of complex tropes arrived at not, in the first instance, through rational argument, rather more likely through 'expert writerly intuition' which is then subject to the 'structures of critical argumentation'. The historiographer writing the past is also dealing with a world beyond the immediate rational or the direct sensory experience on which they bring a 'conceptual order and a set of academic-writerly rules, to the end of identifying or producing a third entity: a theoretical account ... of practice' (Melrose 2005c). For the historiographer, the practice is that of lives led and dances danced in the past. In summary, the way historiographers theorise, in the sense of producing general arguments from specific examples, is based first on an intuitive leap between those specific examples which becomes subject to the rational argument which produces 'theory'. As it is the 'conscious skills and craft of the artmaker which make the workings of intuition significant' (Bannerman in Bannerman *et al* 2006: 19) so it is the craft of the scholar which makes their research theoretically significant.

Despite being accepted for centuries that intuition is one of the fundamental ways human beings comprehend the world, very few professional writers formally acknowledge the intuitive in the process of their theoretical writing (Melrose 2005a). In the binaries, intuition has settled on the side of arts practice; as performance artist Richard Layzell suggests, 'I wouldn't talk about intuition to people ... for many people in other disciplines it might cause extreme anxiety' (in Bannerman *et al* 2006: 33). It is present as a 'knowledge category' in some fields such as education but it is rarely if ever acknowledged as a significant factor in the process of theorising about performance or about performance in history. As Melrose trawled the indices of key texts on performance studies, I did the same with key texts on historiography and found little mention. Although Hayden White acknowledges that history is not a science but 'depends as much on intuition as on analytic methods' (1978: 27) and Marwick (1989: 246) notes

that one of the processes involves ‘vividly expresses insights’, adding that these are based on ‘thorough research and long reflection’ (note the ‘long’), neither author pursues this intriguing process.³ Similarly, examination of the introductions to a range of dance history texts revealed the articulation of rigorous research processes but not the wobbly bits, the hunches, the sudden illuminations coming from ‘nowhere’, that move a work forward. Because introductions to history books tend to be written last, and to summarise what has already been achieved, the early stages and the intuitive steps along the way are buried in the solidity of the outcomes of the research. Ann Daly in her preface to her book on Isadora Duncan (1995) gives an inkling of these in a description of her research process. She acknowledges being ‘perplexed’ by the glimpses of Duncan seen in history books and reconstructions. She raised a series of questions, none of which were answered by these sources. ‘Recognising the limits of historical knowledge’ ... (she attempted) ... ‘at least to try to fantasize what it was about her dancing that drew her body in to the American imagination’ (xi). ‘As I read, as I looked, as I imagined, a much more complex Duncan emerged’ (xi). Although Daly goes on to extrapolate her ‘three levels of enquiry’ as descriptive and analytical, interpretive then critical she misses out, as do most writers, the first and continuing thread which her explanations reveal – her intuition. The lack of recognition of the intuitive in scholarly texts suggests that it not recognised as key to the historian’s craft, or that it is so taken-for-granted that it is not worth mentioning. But if the intuitive is taken for granted by both philosophers on and writers of historiography, it deserves not to be.⁴

Perhaps this taken-for-granted-ness is not surprising. Despite my arguments in relation to the creativity of the research process and writing act, historical research is viewed as a grounded act. Even in dance, wherein we deal with a rich range of sources ranging from archives to dance in performance, the methodical, step-by-step, building of a picture of the past is the *modus operandi*. And yet most of us know, or intuit, that there is more to the process. The historian uses intuition not only in the formulation of problems, in knowing where to look for evidence, in putting disparate evidence together, in attending to the unexpected, but

fundamentally in the moment of the writing act when the words appear as if from nowhere.

In conclusion, by exposing the ‘artistic’ elements of the historians’ activity, the boundaries between ‘practice’ and writing can be blurred. Both artist-choreographer and historiographer, subject ‘creative hunch to sceptical scrutiny’ (Myers 2002: 2) whether in action, thought or word. As Melrose (2005c) posits, both writer (and I include historiographer) and practitioner leap ‘intuitively into a nowhere . . . on the basis of a sense that something might match something else, might momentarily achieve empirical fit with its other – for long enough for new insights to be developed.’

The arguments I have offered in this paper apply, of course, not just to dance or performance history but to all subjects of historical discourse. But placing history making in relation to dance making might serve to nudge all historians into more reflective consideration of their own practice. Both historiographers and artist-practitioners, can ‘make progress in their disciplinary field(s), take creative and imaginative, intuitive leaps in order to develop their theoretical agendas’ (Melrose 2005c). Though set in apparent solidity in writing (though at the mercy, of course, of malleable interpretations by the reader) the historian is conscious of movement. Not only the movement of the dance, dancing people and times about which they write, but about the writing act itself. Supported by thorough research and the scrutiny of evidence, formed in the creativity of the language of narrative and borne all along by the intuitive steps of the historian, historiography is a moving act.

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ENDNOTES

1. Historiography refers to the act of writing about the past; an act which, as Jenkins (1991:6) claims, floats free from the past, or from ‘history’.
2. See White (1978) Ch. 4 ‘Historicism, History and the Imagination’ for a detailed account of complex theoretical stances on the nature of the mythological, poetic and prosaic elements of language as discourse and how this pertains to historiography.
3. A rare exception is Husbands who, writing from a pedagogical perspective, is anxious to privilege student-active learning. He cites Jan Vansima who in 1974 argued that the historian ‘guesses, ponders, backtracks, and finds sources almost by intuition . . . historians start

out with a hunch, an idea' (p. 61). These 'hunches' says Husbands, this intuition, is central to the way we look for and make sense of historical evidence' (p.62). It is interesting that Vansima was writing on the lost histories of Africa, so the intuitive steps in his research might have been more necessary or privileged than in fields where evidence is more accessible.

4. A book by Roger Franz, *Two minds: intuition and analysis in the history of economic thought* (2004) explores how past economists have used intuition and pleads for its acceptance in the field. A web site outlining the recent history of the discovery of the planets is entitled 'From intuition to discovery' (<http://planetquest.jpl.nasa.gov/science.science.index.cfm>.) Sites can be found on the role of intuition in natural history. Nothing is readily available, however, on its role in history. The great majority of mainstream history books ignore the histories of performance. For example, in Burke (1991), the editor mentions in his introduction of wide array of histories – but not those of performance. In Ch. 10 on the History of the Body, no mention is made of the body in performance.

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