



DOCTORAL THESIS

Moving Identities

Multiplicity, Embodiment and the Contemporary Dancer

Roche, Jennifer

Award date:
2009

Awarding institution:
University of Roehampton

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Moving Identities: Multiplicity, Embodiment and the Contemporary Dancer

By

Jennifer Roche, MA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of
PhD

School of Arts
Roehampton University
2009

Abstract

Currently, across dance studies, choreographies are usually discussed as representational of the choreographer, with little attention focused on the dancers who also bring the work into being. As well as devaluing the contribution that the dancer makes to the choreographic process, the dancer's elision from mainstream discourse deprives the art form of a rich source of insight into the incorporating practices of dance. This practice-based research offers a new perspective on choreographic process through the experiential viewpoint of the participating dancer. It involves encounters with contemporary choreographers Rosemary Butcher (UK), John Jasperse (US), Jodi Melnick (US) and Liz Roche (Ire). Utilizing a mixed-mode research structure, it covers the creative process and performance of three solo dance pieces in Dublin in 2008, as well as an especially composed movement treatise, all of which are documented on the attached DVD.

The main hypothesis presented is that the dancer possesses a *moving identity* which is a composite of past dance experience, anatomical structures and conditioned human movement. This is supported by explorations into critical theory on embodiment, including Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'the habitus'. The moving identity is identified as accumulative, altering through encounters with new choreographic movement patterns in independent contemporary dance practice. The interior space of the dancer's embodied experience is made explicit in chapter 3, through four discussions that outline the dancer's creative labour in producing each choreographic work. Through adopting a postmodern critical perspective on human subjectivity, supported by Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari and Alain Badiou, among others, the thesis addresses the inherent challenges which face independent contemporary dancers within their multiple embodiments as they move between different choreographic processes. In identifying an emergent paradigmatic shift in the role of dancer within dance-making practices, this research forges a new direction that invites further dancer-led initiatives in practice-based research.

For Grant

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisors Stephanie Jordan and Carol Brown for their kind support and patience. Their enthusiastic engagement with my research has been an immense source of encouragement. Thank you to choreographers John Jasperse, Jodi Melnick, Rosemary Butcher and my sister, Liz Roche, for their generosity in contributing their time, energy and talent to my practical research. I would like to thank Marina Rafter and Catherine Nunes from the International Dance Festival Ireland/Dublin Dance Festival for financially supporting the initial stages of the practical research and Laurie Uprichard for seeing the co-production of Solo³ through to completion for the festival in 2008. As always, I must acknowledge the wonderful support of my parents throughout my dance career and particularly to my Dad for being a sounding-board throughout the PhD. Finally, I would like to thank my husband Grant, who has been married to me for as long as I have been working on this PhD. His patient belief has made this possible.

Table of Contents:

<i>Introduction</i>	viii
----------------------------------	------

Chapter 1: From Dancing Bodies to Corporeal Configurations

1.1 A Broad Vista of Practice.....	1
1.2 Dancing Bodies.....	6
1.3 Embodying the Ideal.....	7
1.4 The Hired Body—Developments in the US.....	10
1.5 The Emergence of the Independent Contemporary Dancer.....	12
1.5.1 Ireland.....	13
1.5.2 Britain.....	17
1.6 Homogenized Bodies.....	21
1.7 The Project of the Independent Contemporary Dancer.....	24
1.8 The Moving Identity.....	25
1.9 The Sensory Engram.....	27
1.10 Mirror Neurons.....	29
1.11 Physicalism and Dance.....	30
1.12 The Body Image.....	32
1.13 Breaking Bodily Boundaries.....	34
1.14 Bourdieu’s Habitus.....	36
1.15 Culture and Gender as (De) stabilising Forces.....	37
1.16 Living with Instability: Multiplicity.....	39
1.17 Deleuze and De-stratification	41
1.18 The Dancer as Shape-shifter	43

Chapter 2: Finding Subject-hood: Dancers in Choreographic

Process

2.1 A Haunting Machine.....	45
2.2 Stillness as Revolt.....	49
2.3 Fluid, Dynamic Subject-hood.....	53

2.4 Breaking New Ground.....	60
2.5 Intersubjective/Intercorporeal Processes.....	62
2.6 Artisanal Approaches.....	63
2.7 The Signature Choreographer.....	69
2.8 Erasing Dancing.....	70
2.9 The Death of the Choreographer!?!.....	72
2.10 Dancing Subjectivity.....	75
2.11 The Dancer and the Dance.....	76
2.12 Processes of Emergence.....	79
2.13 Autopoiesis in the Choreographic Process.....	81
2.14 Re-materialising Dancers.....	86

Chapter 3: Solo Mapping: Multiple Embodiments

3.1 Corporeal Configuring.....	89
3.2 Methodology: Dancer-led Production.....	90
3.3 Documentation—The Divided Subject.....	93
3.4 Tracing and Weaving Narratives.....	96
3.5 Other Dancing Voices/Autobiographical Perspectives.....	98
3.6 Rosemary Butcher Process.....	102
3.7 John Jasperse Process.....	108
3.8 Jodi Melnick Process.....	116
3.9 Liz Roche Process.....	123
3.10 Performance Traces—Solo Edges.....	130
3.11 The Movement Treatise/ Many Bodies in One Body.....	132
3.12 Corporeal Matrices.....	135

<i>Conclusions</i>	139
---------------------------------	-----

Appendices

Appendix A: Movement Treatise Text.....	150
---	-----

Introduction

This research has emerged out of my practice as a contemporary dancer during a career that has spanned almost twenty years. It is a study of the creative process of independent contemporary dancers who work with many different choreographers and therefore embody a wide range of choreographic styles as part of their career path. In this practice-led research I adopt the role of researcher/participant in creative processes with four contemporary choreographers; Rosemary Butcher (UK), John Jasperse (US), Jodi Melnick (US) and Liz Roche (Ire). The practical outcomes are embedded in three completed solo dance pieces, which were performed in Dublin on the 24th and 25th April 2008 and a movement treatise performed in Roehampton University on the 6th May 2009. Each of these is documented on the accompanying DVD to this thesis.

My hypothesis is that the dancer has a 'moving identity' which is both an individual way of moving and a process of incorporating different movement experiences in training and in professional practice. Over the course of their careers, independent contemporary dancers work in many creatively distinct choreographic processes, led by various choreographers, who each utilise an individual approach to movement. I propose that this process can alter the dancer's 'moving identity' through the accumulation of new patterns of embodiment that remain incorporated as choreographic traces.

As it is dancer-led, this research identifies a new field in practice-based research. Currently, across dance studies, choreographies are usually discussed as representational of the choreographer, with little attention focused on the dancers who also bring the work into being. As well as devaluing the contribution that the dancer makes to the choreographic process, the dancer's elision from mainstream discourse deprives the art form of a rich source of insight into the incorporating practices of dance. Choreographers are generally considered to be the embodied minds of the dance work, holding the

template of the unfolding dance piece to act upon the neutral dancer. By the same token, dancers are reduced to passive receptacles of the movement, puppets in the process, whose bodies are given over to the demands of the choreography. In this way, dancers often cease to be considered as self-representational and are viewed externally as purely embodying the creative concepts of the choreographer in performance.

This research questions whether the dancer exercises agency in the creative process and explores ways of uncovering the dancer's labour in dance-making. Issues such as authorship of the choreographic work are addressed in relation to the emergence of the signature choreographer in recent years, a phenomenon which has arisen through the influence of capitalist modes of production on choreographic practices. The dancer's psychophysical engagement with choreography is examined through focusing on body-mind synergies in creative work and through identifying the way in which dancers build or break habitual movement patterns. The status of dancers within the social stratum is interrogated also, through measuring the implications of their responsive, facilitative role within current contemporary arts practice.

This research is timely as it reflects the emergence of a new paradigm encompassing the dancer's activity in choreographic practice. Additionally, it identifies a new area in the field of dance studies, that of the dancer as both a site of knowledge and as self-representational.

Relevance to Other Research in the Field

In her recently completed PhD, Cynthia Ann Roses-Thema (2007) placed dancers as 'rhetors' (or orators) of their performance experiences. She argued that this is a new position for dancers and acknowledged them as 'active participants' in producing the choreographic work onstage (see 2.11). Roses-Thema also identified that the dancer's

experience is rarely included in dance studies and when it is, the account is very far removed temporally and spatially from the performance moment. To address this, she interviewed dancers directly after their performances in order to map their complex engagement with materialising the choreography.

Roses-Thema's research marks an important step in bringing forward the dancer's experience into dance studies. However, as it is initiated externally, the dancers remain as subjects of the research. In contrast, my study re-positions the dancer as interrogator of the dance-making process and thereby affects a change in power balance and perspective. This adds a new dimension to dance as a creative practice to complement Roses-Thema's more objective viewpoint.

Throughout the time frame of this research, I have encountered dancers who are unravelling the conventional limitations inherent in their role, to examine what it means to be a dancer-interpreter through performance. Two such artists, Juliette Mapp and Levi Gonzales, both based in New York, have individually explored their dancing genealogies in recent dance performances¹. Gonzales (2008) presented individual excerpts of movement phrases by a range of New York- based choreographers, stating that he intended to be a human map of these different choreographies. Mapp (2007) created a piece that included on stage many of the choreographers, teachers and dancers who had influenced her throughout her career. In this way, she presented her dancing body as a composite of these multiple experiences. These viewpoints have emerged in conjunction with the infiltration of postmodern, post-structuralist and post-Cartesian thought into dance-making processes and reflect some of the prevalent philosophical trends of this current historical moment.

¹ I viewed a work in progress showing by Gonzales in DanceSpace Project in January 2008 as part of the APAP showcase. Mapp produced a solo piece at Dance Theatre Workshop, NYC, *Anna, Ikea and I* (2007), which I discussed with her on her visit to Dublin in 2008.

This exploration is situated in Ireland, but reflects the international nature of contemporary dance practice by including a wider field of choreographers and dancers based in Britain, North America and Australia. The practical research is structured around a singular perspective—my own, constituting a phenomenological mapping of the territory which points to further research possibilities into this novel area. The individual viewpoint is supported by interviews with an international spread of eight independent contemporary dancers throughout the course of the project. Through building a critical framework and interweaving contributions from the interviewees in this text, the personal perspective has been connected outwards to engage with a broader discourse on dance and this has, in turn, influenced and affected my perspective.

Methodology

This research is characterised as multi-dimensional theorising after performance studies writer, Susan Melrose (2005 [online]), who states:

Expert practitioners *already theorise* in multi-dimensional, multi-schematic and multi-participant modes.

I have utilised my skills as a dancer to explore through a number of modalities, adopting a 'postpositivist' research position that reflects the shifting and multiple nature of the socially constructed self (Jill Green & Susan W. Stinson, 1999). I have not endeavoured to establish a singular truth about the dance-making process, as this would detract from the agency of all dancers but rather, to reveal a number of new perspectives on dance as a dynamic and creative endeavour for dancers. Throughout this study, I have used my embodied self as the research tool, as the one who participates, discovers and records. The outcomes that support my hypotheses are delineated in the various modalities of

research that I employed; the solo performances, this written text and the movement treatise I composed, entitled Hauntings and Tracings (2008) (see 3.11 and DVD, Menu 2).

For my interviews (four main interviews and a workshop group interview), I adopted a narrative methodology, as outlined by American sociologist Catherine Kohler Reissman (2004:709), through which interviewer and interviewee “engage in an evolving conversation” as “two active participants who jointly produce meaning”. Reissman’s work explores narrative theory in relation to social sciences and the field of humanities. I used the interviews as an opportunity to discuss my research and debate my questions with a range of highly-skilled and experienced dancers, as well as a means of understanding their personal approach to dance practice and their response to the idea of the moving identity. Each interview has a distinct structure and style which corresponds to a different stage of the evolving research. The information gathered from each interviewee has been very rich, both from their individual perspectives and also as a way of mapping different approaches across cultures (between the US, Britain, Ireland and Australia). Extracts from the interviews are quoted throughout the text.

At different stages throughout the research project, I interacted with other dancers through research workshops to help me to develop my themes. These workshops took place on 8th –10th August 2005, 7th - 8th January 2006, 5th - 6th October 2006 and 24th April 2007. I have included some written input from the participants, who are listed in the appendices, in the thesis. I have kept a written journal also, which has served to document the emergent themes that arose from the practical research. This was written in a ‘stream of consciousness’ style and certain edited extracts have been included, in indented italics, throughout the text.

Critical perspective

In forming my critical perspective for this study, I incorporated a postmodern framework that posits the self as a composite of multiplicities. I have also drawn together critical perspectives from recent dance studies and somatic practices to represent the social and psychophysical realms of the dancer's experiential terrain.

In this thesis, I explore the dancer's position from a dance studies perspective through the work of dance writers Ann Cooper Albright (1997, 2007) Susan Leigh Foster (1992, 2005), Emilyn Claid (2002, 2006), Sally Gardner (2007), André Lepecki (2004, 2006) and Dee Reynolds (2007). I also incorporate the dance writing of Susan Melrose (2005, 2005[online]) from the field of performance studies. I address the complexity of the dancer's psychophysical activity through postmodern theories of embodiment from feminist philosophers Elizabeth Grosz (1994, 1995) and Judith Butler (1989, 1993) and phenomenological theory from a feminist perspective by Gail Weiss (1999). I utilise, French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu's (1990) work on the habitus and also incorporate other perspectives on Bourdieu's work from somatic studies writer, Richard Shusterman (1999) to address the impact of the social sphere on the dancer's way of moving. The layers of the dancer's subjectivity are uncovered through postmodern writing from Slavoj Žižek (2004), Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987), Deleuze (2004), and Rosi Braidotti (2000, 2002) among others. In contrast, I appropriate Alain Badiou's (2000, 2005a, 2005b) theory of subject-hood, which challenges the post-modern stance, in order to conceptualise how dancers could achieve agency from within their responsive role. To deliver a holistic account of the dancer's practice, I incorporate texts that explore the moving body by body-worker Deane Juhan (1987) and phenomenologist Maurice Merleau- Ponty (1962). I also include writing on somatic awareness by Shusterman (2006, 2008).

Postmodern, feminist writer, Rosi Braidotti's (2002:70), notion of 'becoming minoritarian' has great relevance for this research. This term refers to a process of finding empowerment and agency from within a 'subject position', in this case, the silent and often invisible dancer. Braidotti's framework for change indicates how dancers could transform the perception of their role as passive within dance-making, to becoming regarded as active agents who are capable of being self-representational. I have adopted this position in designing the research methodology alongside the use of narrative processes to reveal the interior spaces of the dancer's moving experience. From a background in life narrative studies, Sidonie Smith & Julia Watson (2001: 28) outline how marginalized people find a voice through use of the autobiographical act and by identification with a disenfranchised sector of society:

In such cases, a previously 'voiceless' narrator from a community not culturally authorized to speak...finds in identification the means and the impetus to speak publicly.

Therefore, this research offers a new critical framework through which the dancer could become self-interrogating and self-representational and it is hoped that it will stimulate further research by practicing dancers into this rich field.

Thesis Summary

In chapter 1, I trace the historical emergence of the independent contemporary dancer, who incorporates a number of movement approaches throughout a career. I explore Foster's (1992) text, *Dancing Bodies*, which articulates the different approaches to movement and underlying aesthetic beliefs inherent in canonical dance techniques such as Graham, Cunningham and Classical Ballet. Foster posits that each technique forms a different dancing body and I specifically review her notion of the 'hired body' which relates to the independent dancer, to explore the consequences of not being aligned to one specific technique through this career path.

In this chapter, I introduce the concept of the moving identity and use models from the experiential anatomy of Deane Juhan (1987), a 'body-worker' and clinical practitioner of Trager Technique², to identify how different choreographic styles are 'written' on the motor cortex. I interrogate other bodily incorporations which signal cultural and gendered identity through Bourdieu's concept of the *habitus* (Shusterman, 1999) and Butler's (1993) work on the performative nature of gender. I explore how the theory of 'de-stratification' from Deleuze and Guattari (1987) could describe the dancer's practice of breaking through the moving identity when shifting from one choreographic style to the next.

Chapter 2 examines current methods of choreographic construction, which challenge more conventional models of the dancer as the 'choreographic tool'. This chapter explores the issue of the dancer's subjectivity and agency within the choreographic process. I interrogate the writing of Lepecki (2006), which sheds light on choreography's power over the dancer by contrasting it to Gardner's (2007) description of 'artisanal' practices in modern dance. Gardner presents the choreographer and dancer as human subjects interacting, to counteract the industrial approach to dancers as both interchangeable and non-specific.

In this chapter also, I explore Badiou's (2005b) process of gaining subject-hood through the encounter with an event and reflect on how this model could be used by dancers to 'become minoritarian' within their practice (Braidotti, 2002). Subsequently, I examine ways of re-framing choreographic creation as a process of emergence that is formed from the constituents (choreographer, dancers, collaborators and location) of the process, rather than operating as a tightly controlled scripted score. This is supported through Roses-Thema's (2007) analysis of the way in which dancers 'produce' the

² Trager technique was developed by Milton Trager (1908-1997). "Utilizing gentle, non-intrusive, natural movements, The *Trager* Approach helps release deep-seated physical and mental patterns and facilitates deep relaxation, increased physical mobility, and mental clarity" (Trager information 2010 [online]).

choreography in the performance moment and my account of a working process undertaken with British choreographer, Rosemary Butcher, in 2005.

Chapter 3 recounts the practical research through four distinct discussions, each one describing a solo creation process prior to and during the 2008 performance. The chapter begins with an overview of the research, including an outline of the documentation process and then describes how I developed the texts by tracing narratives that emerged out of the practical research. These four texts are followed by my analysis of embodying the three completed works within the same performance programme and a description of the areas explored within the movement treatise. The multi-dimensional nature of this work is reflected through the journal extracts. Emerging as it does from the practical engagement with each choreographer, this chapter holds the *traces* of embodiment.

Finally, in my conclusions, I point to new possibilities for the dancer to be viewed as an agent in the creative process and propose opportunities for dancers' embodied knowledge to connect to current dance discourse. I outline the findings from the practical research to reveal the creative practices and labour of the dancer. I conclude the thesis by pointing to methodologies for enhancing dancers' psychophysical experience and creativity in choreographic practice and indicating future areas for research.