

# Dualism's Legacies: Dance and Difference in London in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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## 0. Introduction

Research amongst a small number of London based dance artists, has led me to contemplate how different artists negotiate the shared terrain of London in the 'noughties'. Thanks to the social changes that have brought cultures into play with one another, their dancing may be experienced as implicated in a complex web of significances that stretches far across continents and back through time. In this context, consideration of how the dances of a small number of individual artists might be understood to embody cultural values informed my recognition of how they could be perceived to articulate different positions in relation to the legacies of dualism.

## 1. The view from the basement

My point of view is one that has been informed by a particular and limited perspective of dance in London. For over fifteen years, based in an aging adult education college at just the geographic location where the riches and power of central London fade into the outer edges of two of London's poorest boroughs, I witnessed the dichotomies of urban life. Off the streets, and into a converted basement cupboard serving as office, might wander the successful but dissatisfied seeking to find a creative outlet, young adults from a local homeless project and (courtesy of the English Second Language Department), recent immigrants, some of whom longed to perform their traditional dances. At best these groups would happily coexist, at first tolerate and then sometimes learn to value each other's dance preferences. Occasionally, however divisions of some particularly toxic combination of class, ethnicity, culture, religion, age and/or gender would arise and I can vouch from first hand experience the relevance of Stuart Hall's statement that 'the capacity to live with difference is ... the coming question of the twenty-first century' (Hall, 1992).

In this context I became intrigued by the relationship between people's dance preferences and their wider cultural attitudes,

contemplating the contribution an understanding of values as embodied in dance contributes to its appreciation.

## 2. The non- aligned position



Gaby Agis (Photo: Hugo Glendinning)

The artists who became the focus of my case studies certainly do not represent the totality of dance in London, since they share a position in terms of dance, which I consider as 'non - aligned'. (Generally speaking, their choreographic work is not aligned to fulfilling the agenda of a particular established touring company or mainstream dance institution.) My premise was that such artists are likely to be interested in investigating the ways in which their physical presence might be understood and how their work relates to the norms they perceive in more 'established' dance companies or institutions<sup>1</sup>. It was also important that, since they perform their own choreography, they could talk from the viewpoint of both performer and choreographer.

The six artists are, like me, now 'Londoners' and, while none of us would be regarded as disabled, we are mature for dancers. In spite of these similarities, I was aware from the outset that some of the artists draw on different experiences from me, both in terms of dance and their wider cultural background. I envisaged these different perspectives would enrich the research, in part by raising my awareness of my own

assumptions about dance. Thus while Gaby Agis and another female dancer have fairly similar cultural backgrounds to me and share experiences of training in what in Britain is termed ‘contemporary’ dance<sup>2</sup>, two other females are informed by quite different influences: Nina Anderson, who describes her ethnicity as African Caribbean, was brought up in one of the most economically deprived parts of South London and is trained in Egyptian dance; and Sushma Mehta, who describes her ethnicity as Indian, is trained in Kathak. Of the male artists (both of whom chose to remain anonymous) one, who describes himself as black British, was brought up mainly in the north of England and draws on a fusion of dance forms rooted in the freestyle jazz he learned dancing in clubs. The other artist, who describes his ethnicity as ‘Hispanic’, was raised in the Bronx and is fluent in what might be called alternative dance and somatic practices.



Sushma Mehta (Photo: [www.shamaadance.co.uk](http://www.shamaadance.co.uk))

For these ‘non-aligned artists’, working in some ways at a critical distance from established dance companies, the different ways in which their dance negotiates bodily significance is an important aspect of their choreographic style. All can be understood as in some ways continually questioning, sometimes resisting, current norms of bodily image, whether one considers the women’s presentations of the female figure, Artist D’s explorations of awkwardness or Artist B’s determination not to lose the connection between his dance and what he sees as the ‘real’ life experiences of black British people<sup>3</sup>.

This doesn’t mean, however, that this is all there is to appreciating their work since the audience’s attention can also be very much focused on the dancing ‘for itself’. As my research progressed I recognized that what had drawn me to the artists I approached is a commitment to dance as a communicative interaction within society, without reducing their dancing to only signifying a concern with the social. I came to appreciate how skilled they are at playing between an understanding of how their dance might ‘read’ and their phenomenological experience of performance. They explore that territory between dualisms that is important to developments in more academic considerations of human existence, such as the anthropologist Thomas Czordas (1994) posits in his discussion of embodiment.

### 3. Embodiment

This term, ‘embodiment’, itself raises issues that reveal the different conceptions of body and mind that permeate approaches to dance. I soon found out that it is one thing to consider dance as embodying cultural values, and another to account theoretically for how this can be the case. In very general terms the problem is that ‘embodiment’ might refer to a scientist’s view of the physical aspects of human brain, nerves, muscles, perceptual systems etc responding interactively with the environment, or to a sociological approach to a culturally constructed body upon which social discourses are inscribed, or to the intentional and creative act by which a dancer brings their sense of personal agency to their dancing. The first approach appears to mesh well with a view of the body: mind relationship which emphasizes the observable physical interaction of aspects of the brain with other parts of the body, but as Anna Pakes (2006) has pointed out, perhaps leaves little space for the significance of felt experience or intention; the second seems in danger of subordinating bodies to ideas; and the third to seek that interaction between consciousness and physical action that has been a problem for philosophy ever since Descartes’ ‘*cogito ergo sum*’ (1968/1637p. 55).

By drawing upon explorations of embodiment and bodily being in anthropology, existential phenomenology, philosophical aesthetics and sociology,<sup>4</sup> I arrived at a position which

might be summarised thus: bringing the phenomenological experience of dance performance into play with a poststructuralist understanding of the shifting sands upon which cultural significances are continuously constructed, dissolved and reconstituted, may allow for an approach to dance that marries an experiential sense of communication with recognition of the instability of the signifiers dance creates<sup>5</sup>. In this context, what is perceived as embodied in dance is located within the play between real: imaginary, flesh: culture, dependent on a perception that is in itself interpretative (or 'seeing as' in the Wittgenstein sense<sup>6</sup>). This falls short of making claims for the ontological status of what is understood as embodied, but by virtue of a person's enmeshment in a particular social environment, their acts are viewed as reciprocally related to the experience of others and it is this that grounds understanding of what is embodied. Hence, how movement skills and styles are displayed within dance can be interpreted as embodying cultural attitudes.<sup>7</sup>

#### **4. Articulating the body: mind relationship**

As I reflected more deeply on how values are embodied in dance, it struck me how dance articulates different attitudes to the relationship between body: mind itself. Indeed at present, the very popularity of the term 'embodiment' seems to reveal common concerns that shape much current dance practice in London in which articulating a body: mind connectivity has become very important.

Often so called 'alternative' dance practices challenge what is seen as an overly separatist view of body and mind that is viewed as informing traditional western approaches to dance technique, especially ballet. What, in the American dancer and writer Sondra Horton Fraleigh's (1987, p. 9) terms, is an 'instrumental' attitude to the body, suggests not only a distinction between body and mind, but that the former is subservient to the latter. It is all too easy to relate this to an understanding of the subjugated body within a patriarchal culture informed by Christian traditions. Not surprisingly then the challenge to the seeming dominance of mind over body was important to many female pioneers of Modern dance, to the more overtly feminist practitioners who came after them and to those who have more broadly challenged the

established western traditions from the 1960's onwards. While philosophically speaking rationalism and positivism are distinct from Cartesian dualism, it is often the body's subservience to the rational world of formal geometry, or to the objective mechanics of positivism, that are criticized by those dance artists who seek to challenge the dominance of the mind over things bodily<sup>8</sup>. In considering ballet, while what the (second phase) twentieth century feminists focused their criticism on was the idealization of the ballerina's body as the object of the male gaze, we might also consider that it was the enmeshment of the body within rationalist ideals that fueled the norms of classical technique. Interwoven with this, a positivist approach to the body as natural object must also have informed many a training manual, so that where scientific methods are used to achieve bodily ideals linked to concerns with form, the dancer may be thought of as enmeshed in a complex of both positivist and rationalist traditions. Further this is set in creative tension with the desire for self expression that may be viewed as the product of an emphasis on individualism, influencing both the Romantic development of ballet and the reaction of Modern dance against it.

#### **5. Nature: Culture**

While large sections of the dance population in London continue to pursue traditional 'balletic' ideals, in what might be termed the mainstream of British contemporary dance, the dancer may be thought of as embodying a similar layering of traces of different attitudes to bodily being. Dancers may be called upon to make shapes with the formal clarity of any ballet dancer, be trained using scientific principles to achieve optimum mechanical efficiency in their movement, and in doing so be required to present an 'organic quality'. Young, fit and above all slim, their images may also be designed to contribute to a company profile that has to compete in an increasingly global and diverse market place for audiences at a time when from ballet to breakin', virtuosic skills, technological innovation and the sheer sex appeal of dancers increases from one season to the next, and variety (cultural or otherwise) seems to sell tickets<sup>9</sup>. In such a context it is possible to see

such dancers as embodying the contradictions of contemporary British life in which the public sector is dominated by measures and targets aimed towards the attainment of predetermined social ideals for a population that lusts for the latest products of imported fashion and technology - whilst at the same time longing for a more 'natural', eco friendly life style.



Aya Jane Saotome (Photo: Irven Lewis)

In contrast, in what in Britain is called the Independent sector of the contemporary dance scene, may be found more emphasis on a form of bodily sensitivity, or connectivity, that often draws on mid twentieth century American dance experiments that led to what are now labeled as contact improvisation and release based techniques. Such dance forms are often reinforced by somatic practices such as Body Mind Centering©, Feldenkrais or Alexander, and may be viewed as both a reaction to the dualist legacies of the past, and the values of higher- faster- longer that may be felt to dominate in a global dance market. Here it seems that issues of the body: mind relationship have become interwoven with that of another dualism nature: culture. For example, workshops offered through Independent Dance in Body Mind Centring (BMC) © seemed to offer a practice of unpicking culturally learned movement patterns to reconnect with what are conceived as the primitive motor patterns that underlie them.<sup>10</sup>

Whether or not it is the case that at some basic level there are shared 'natural' motor patterns to human movement, in dance motility

is culturally ensnared. It seems likely that at least part of what is perceived as 'organic' depends on the dancer being able, in some way, to draw on those bodily movements that in a particular culture are not usually thought of as being brought under conscious control. Manifestations of the 'natural' or 'organic' in western theatre dance have varied from Noverre<sup>11</sup> to Fokine, from Duncan to the BMC© inspired dance explorations I witnessed<sup>12</sup>. Perhaps, it is in the particular play between conscious and subconscious that the distinctions between different manifestations of the 'natural' are embodied in dance. How this second dualism is approached might then be seen as embodied within some theatre dance in the tension between recognizable, culturally conditioned patterns and movement that appears to draw on what is regarded as an 'organic' source.

A salutary reminder of the cultural attitudes that shape understanding of the 'natural' is the attitude of the dancer Nina Anderson to some alternative dance practices including Gaby Agis' Skinner Releasing classes. Intellectually and experientially informed of the primitivist assumptions the west (historically at least) have made about black bodies and, conversely, perhaps not as inculcated with a consciousness of 'lack' in relation to the 'natural', this British born artist of African Caribbean parentage seemed to me to enjoy a slightly ironic attitude to the earnestness with which her white, liberally and well educated counterparts attempted to regain a sense of the (lost) 'natural'.



Nina Anderson (Photo: Morley College)

Similarly, I noticed that while many of his counterparts in contemporary dance were busily trying to explore their 'natural' motivation to move, Artist B was frustrated that contemporary dance audiences did not always recognise the sophisticated level of training and thinking informing his work. These experiences may not be universal amongst dancers from ethnic minorities; indeed, Artist D excels in alternative body practices, using them not only in performance but also drawing on them in his teaching. However, that he is recognisably one of a limited number in London of artists from ethnic minorities in this field perhaps indicates that it may be important to consider the extent to which some current British alternative contemporary dance practices embody particular concerns that may emanate from a specific cultural heritage. Certainly when I look back at how, in my teens, I used to dance I wonder whether in practicing a syllabus exercise for pirouettes in quarters and halves I imbibed a rather British (even English) attitude to the analysis of dance steps and the control of the body. For me, as I am sure with many of my contemporaries, it was very important to find a different way to experience bodily being. Hence although the body awareness techniques many of my generation of British dancers explored may have derived from different continents, perhaps what we sought in them was shaped by very particularly British experiences. And, given the current diversity of British communities it is important now to consider that British people's approaches to bodily being may be informed by very different cultural attitudes to those I grew up with.

This does not ignore the view that a concern with the retrieval of evolutionary and/or developmental movement patterns, may reflect a desire to find structures that are shared across cultural differences. However, there still may be a primitivist assumption that it is white, middle class, well educated dancers who have to work harder at the retrieval of the 'natural' that, until quite recently, seems to have inhibited cross cultural exploration of alternative somatic based dance practices. So while in London, there are any number of fusions of contemporary dance with Asian or African dance forms, jazz and street dance and

so on, it has been rare to see these artists in say a Skinner releasing or Feldenkrais class. Although a few case studies hardly makes for conclusive evidence, it did also seem to me noticeable how much more those dancers who drew on forms other than contemporary dance thought about how to create dances that could be significant for audiences with different cultural backgrounds to themselves. This may just be the result of the particular intercultural dynamics of my research, but it is worth considering whether in some British contemporary dance practices there is a danger of becoming so focused on challenging body: mind dualism that this inhibits the challenge to other dualisms, thus limiting the exploration of self: other across difference.

## **6. The Future**

All this may be about to change. In London the so called 'alternative' styles have now informed the release based training at mainstream conservatoires for contemporary dance such as Laban and the Place. So, as the social changes in Britain produce a new generation of young people, some of them are coming into contact with these new traditions without seeing them as alternatives to established contemporary dance practices. Since hybrid explorations which draw on contemporary dance alongside Kathak, Bharata Natyam and Africanist dance have already proved successful<sup>13</sup>, perhaps more instances similar to a recent event at Independent Dance mixing breaking, capoeira and contact improvisation are to be expected.<sup>14</sup>

Thinking about the future, I think it is important to recognize values that are shared by the artists who contributed to the research. Integral to these is a belief in performance as a dynamic interaction in which integrity is intrinsically important. Further research would be needed to see whether this understanding of integrity in the moment of performative interaction is more widely understood and, or, valued. However, it could be argued that currently, for many people living in London, the experience of increasing diversity, the global separation of families and communities, changes to established rules of behaviour, the prioritising of digital above face to face communication, a disenchantment with political 'spin' and more recently recognition of a disjuncture between tangible and

monetary values, may all contribute to a fraught experience of the relationship between self and other. In such a context, it would not be surprising to find some people prioritising the potential of an art form to offer a sense of 'honest' engagement with others. Notwithstanding the difficulties of understanding dances that draws on traditions and bodily conventions different to my own, what is interesting to contemplate is how within a fragmented, yet interconnected, culture of theatre dance, the experience of living and working in twenty first century London might engender shared values that seem to emerge across more obvious cultural differences. As a new generation of dance artists emerge in this landscape it will be interesting to see how they negotiate dualism's legacies and in particular chart that fraught terrain between self and other.



avantgarde dance (Photo: Irven Lewis)

<sup>1</sup> These drew on research by Gaye Morris (2001, 54), Judith Lynn Hanna (1979, 227) and performer and feminist scholar Ann Cooper Albright (1997) and my own observations.

<sup>2</sup> For some discussions of this term (and its problems) see Preston-Dunlop, V. (1981). *Dance Words*, Chur, Switzerland: Harwood Academic Publishers, p.18: Nicholas, L. (2004) Dancing in the margins? British modern dance in the 1940s and 1950s. In Carter, A. (ed.) *Rethinking dance history*. London: Routledge, p.27: Grau, A. (1998) Myths of Origin. In A. Carter (Ed.) *The Routledge dance studies reader*. London: Routledge, pp. 197 – 202.

<sup>3</sup> Further discussion of these artists' work can be found in my PhD thesis at [www.daisyworld.org.uk](http://www.daisyworld.org.uk)

<sup>4</sup> In particular in the work of the cultural and psychological anthropologist Thomas Czordas (1994), the philosophical aesthetician Paul Crowther (1993), the existential phenomenologist Merleau Ponty (1962/1945; 1972/1961) and the sociologist Charles Varela (1995).

<sup>5</sup> I later recognised similarities with how Preston-Dunlop (2002) had developed a choreological approach to dance drawing on the concept of binocular vision.

<sup>6</sup> See Wittgenstein (2001/1947-49 pp165-194) for discussion of the recognition of 'seeing as'.

<sup>7</sup> In considering how, for the dance artist, a certain amount of conscious agency is possible in this arena, the sociologist Bourdieu's (1984/1979) concepts of habitus and field may be useful. In the act of dancing a dancer may make conscious decisions even though these are filtered through levels of consciousness of which they are less aware and which may carry shared cultural values. It is these latter that may sometimes be difficult to articulate for both dancers and audiences, since they may only be tacitly aware of them.

<sup>8</sup> According to the dancer and educator Kirsty Alexander, 'deeper kinaesthetic experience of movement' is set in opposition to 'the philosophy of "I think therefore I am" and the mind/body split it implies' (Alexander, n.d.). Skinner releasing, is portrayed as using images with which the student is encouraged to 'merge', experiencing them 'at a level just beyond our conscious control' so 'they become another reality'.

<sup>9</sup> See for example the variety of dance currently on offer at Sadlers Wells compared with the seasons before it closed for renovation.

<sup>10</sup> Reading a manual to support workshops in this technique (Allison, Bainbridge Cohen and White, 1984, 3) I found the following statements: *As we recapitulate the inherited or evolved development movement patterns, we experience with clarity our own personal development process and our deviations or inhibitions of the natural (inherited) process. And: Brain structures near the base represent an early ascent on the scale of evolution. Parts of the brain stem are responsible for eliciting stereotyped patterns of motion, e.g. swimming, and can be elicited as primitive reflex patterns in man.*

<sup>11</sup> The interest in more natural expression also relates to what Munroe Beardsley 1975[1966] saw as conflict between empirical and rationalist approaches to art within Enlightenment aesthetics: Rationalists (viewing reason as the reliable source of human knowledge) were concerned with the given (apriori) rules for art deduced through reasoning; Empiricists concerned with drawing from experience to establish knowledge (aposteriori) about the nature of the experience of aesthetic enjoyment and the psychological genesis of artistic creation.

<sup>12</sup> K. J. Holmes' summer 2006 workshop presented by Independent Dance

<sup>13</sup> See for example Akram Khan, Shobana Jeyasing, Bawren Tavaziva and Jonzi D.

<sup>14</sup> A multi-disciplinary improvisation performance presented at Siobahn Davies Dance Studios by Independent Dance that included breaking, capoeira and contemporary contact improvisation, with dance artists including Katie P, Will Thorburn, Erez Odiera and Annie Lok.

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