

EDITORIAL

ROBERT VESTY

Middlesex University

Words and Dance

‘In the beginning was – and is – not the word. In the beginning was — and is —
movement’ (Sheets-Johnstone 2011: 347)

This special – *Words and Dance* – issue of *Choreographic Practices* aims to speak to, and shout about, the way in which some early twenty-first-century dance practices are playing with, around and through the word. In turn, it is concerned with not just how words look or sound on the page, stage and elsewhere, but how a dancer’s animate exploration of language can create particular opportunities to crack open words and reveal our playing with them as a deeply contingent and remarkably fleshy affair.

In the context of this issue, words are taken to mean linguistic formulations that usually manifest as spoken, or voiced, in performance. In the instances accounted for across these pages, they materialise in labyrinthine ways – as quotidian speech, as instruction, as mediated, as objects, as affects, as unfinished business (think of the fricative beginnings of a word yet to be fully formed), as-strings-of, as phrases, as sense and non-sense, as and when, and as, for the most part, poetry.

Indeed, a concern with poetry and its relationship with dance, was the key spur and driver for this issue of *Choreographic Practices*. The imperative emerged from a week-long event entitled *Space and Words for Dancers*, which was led by dancers/poets Julyen Hamilton (Spain) and Billie Hanne (Belgium) and hosted by Chisenhale Dance Space in London (July, 2015). Twenty-five professional dancers participated in a week of work focused on the use of space and the production of poetry using improvisation as a tool. The week studied how words have dimension, how their geometry can be further understood through somatic awareness, and how they can be produced in the moment with a sensitivity to their material form and corporeal stem. Two public solo performances by Hamilton and Hanne served as examples for how dance and poetry can live together in performance as they are simultaneously and immediately produced in instant choreographies.

Yet the writings in this issue also attest to the way in which words in dance can often be tricky things to navigate too – their ontological slipperiness and semantic stickiness, however generative we may feel them to be, is also a fertile site for hesitancy, doubt and anxiety. How the dancer-poet handles this precariousness becomes a central concern that touches on the imperative to practise with them in the first place. Indeed, out of the *Space and Words for Dancers* event a singular question was framed and discussed at length: What skills are required of the dancer and poet to produce dance and poetry in performance? In some ways, the collection of articles and artefacts gathered here, could be framed by this question insofar as they tackle, from artist-centred perspectives, various strategies for dealing with the dual activities of speaking and dancing. How we begin to dissect and articulate those processes – even in written form – further problematises the terrain such that several concerns demand to be addressed from embodied perspectives.

It may come as little surprise then that many of the voices offering reflection, analysis and insight here speak from practitioner perspectives in ways that also play spatially and temporally with words on the page, most often appearing as poetry, but also as script, or objects. The fissures and interruptions in academically-registered prose go some way towards performing the manner in which the dominant semantic structuring of language can be collapsed through choreographic processes so that we can take account also of the enlanguaged body and the body in language. The

phenomenological philosopher Maxine Sheets-Johnstone has asserted the importance of considering, in any theory of speech production and perception, ‘the place of a concrete, empirically present, sentiently experienced living body...a flesh and bone speaker, a living articulator of sounds’ (2011: 324). So, as well as considering any kinaesthetic component to speech, it is important to point to the interplay between the visual and the aural too. What words are, how they are formed through movement, and how movement is formed or informed by words, also gives space for its sonic appearance. After all, the word is usually heard. Indeed, all the practices referred to in this issue use words that are voiced - either live or mediatised – yet little attention is given generally to the material function of speaking in the study of choreographic practices. As a preface to the articles that follow I want to celebrate the role of the voice and accordingly the mouth, tongue, lips and cheeks which, for the spectator at least, serve as visible markers of the labour of speaking. What is remarkable about this is the demand on both performers and audiences alike to have to deal with the way in which dance may privilege the ears as well as the eyes. A visuality can be seen and heard working in tandem and concert with an aurality such that disciplines are transversed and senses shifted. Arguably, the vocal activity so situated in the choreographic practices represented amongst the articles in this issue calls for further attention to be paid to the sonic potential of choreography overall. The presence of words in dance invites a different kind of *listening* to dance. Brandon LaBelle, in his *Lexicon of the Mouth* (2014) has pointed towards the political potency of such acts by suggesting that ‘to give one’s ear is to invest in the making of a future public; it is to give the body over, for a distribution of agency’ (LaBelle 2014: x). Any bias towards an activation of the dancer’s mouth, will have a synchronal effect on the ear so that the relationship between visuality and aurality can be re-framed and interrogated. I plant this seed for readers to keep in mind as they pass through the issue.

So, although it would be fair to say that the voice has long been activated to produce spoken words in dance by dancers, there does appear to be a cacophony of vocal activity being heard loud and clear in contemporary dance practice in a way that invites further interrogation into the voice’s processes beyond this issue and beyond our field. Indeed, utilising embodied approaches to language has been a growing concern across various disciplines, and dance studies has benefited from new interdisciplinary dialogues. For example, discourse emerging from cognitive linguistics have been integrated into the way we think about some choreographic processes – and here I am thinking of Mark Johnson and George Lakoff’s oft-cited *Metaphors We Live By* (Lakoff, Johnson 2008) as an example of how our understanding of language might be shaped by reappraising how it is formed in embodied ways. Given that choreographic practices would appear an appropriate

place to locate a sentient body to test and apply any theory of speech and language, perhaps then it is timely to begin to visit anew any emergent critical insights into the way textual language is engaged through interdisciplinary, immersive, participatory and collaborative dance practices in the contemporary moment. To that end, it is hoped that this *Words and Dance* issue will offer either points of departure, revealing snapshots, or deep insight into ways in which spoken words are being used by dancers and others through various choreographic practices and processes. Emerging from these are historic lineages of contemporary dance in Europe, the US and Australasia and their relationship to new and emerging contexts; their contours revealed as much as soundscape as landscape.

The issue is made up of seven submissions, either full-length research essays, artists' pages, or a combination of both that fall into three sections: (1) accounts that variously speak from practitioner perspectives such that we get access to the inner workings of studio-based making and choreographic processes, (2) ethnographic approaches to the observation of two choreographers' processes, and (3) a curated magazine-style space for paraphernalia and documentation – poetry, images, reflection, transcription – relating to the *Space and Words for Dancers* event.

The issue opens with Scott Thurston and Sarie Slee's *Vital Signs: Poetry, Movement and the Writing Body*, an account of how the word, particularly poetry, and the move might collaborate through the authors' practice-led enquiry. They provide a very useful thumbnail historiography of how poetry's preoccupation with dance has emerged through the modern age – a useful contextual bedrock to support the rest of the issue – before going on to reveal some of what is produced by their studio-based 'collaborative enquiry' into the relationship between movement and linguistic phrasing. Thurston and Slee layout the work of Jackson Mac Low and Simone Forti, as well as a European context that implicates dance theatre's explicit utilisation of dramaturgy to lay foundations for where they might position their search for 'new forms of transdisciplinary artistic practice'. This is framed by Daniel Stern's concept of vitality dynamics (time, space, movement, direction and force), in order to uncover the 'micro-structures' of both words and movement and reveal their common 'syntax' and potentiality.

Forti remains a presence in Alys Longley's article *I wanted to find you by inhabiting your tongue: Mistranslating between words and dance in choreographic practice* which traces Forti's influence on Longley's work with her collaborators in New Zealand on a choreographic piece entitled: *Radio Strainer*. Longley tackles the issue of translation or mis-reading and mis-translation 'as a creative engine that enables the movement of ideas and affects' and uses Deleuze and Guattari's concept of a minor literature to unpack distinctions between the transmission and translation of movement-initiated writing and its affective power.

Staying with improvisatory practice, Hilary Elliot's *Metronome and Melodic Lines* offers a first-hand improviser's account of two strategies for the solo performer working with words and movement. One – *Metronome* – a training strategy developed by Australian improvisers Peter Trotman and Andrew Morrish; the other developed by the author herself – *Melodic Lines* – a training/score which uses sensation as a key stimulus for speech. Elliott utilises Diedre Sklar's idea of 'somatic reverberations' to further understand this sensorial approach to speech, as well as drawing on Ruth Zaporah's *Action Theater* form which makes much of the role of a sentient self in embodied language. Elliott's account of training is a useful reminder that structures and constraints serve as a scaffold for dancers who may be daunted by introducing language into their practice and she builds on Sondra Fraleigh's 'organic wholes' to suggest taking account of the "umms" and "ahhs" – the hesitations – as a way towards nestling in the constituent sounds of words a little longer.

Elise Nuding's perambulatory yet rigorous essay *Riffing, writing, realizing (Or, a simultaneous reflection on and re-entry into a particular score)* is a candid and sensuous self-reflective muse on her score *I, object*. Nuding weaves a way through a series of more or less kinaesthetic modes and multiple voices – writer/doer/dancer/listener/reader/viewer – to work with 'repetition, variation, and accumulation' in a practice-led research enquiry, ultimately arriving at a point where she explores through practices of embodied writing and embodied dancing, the complexity of an apparently simple riff – "I, Object". Nuding advances an 'understanding of language as embodied and soma as enlanguaged' to reveal this complexity as a 'kinetic-cognitive-linguistic web'.

We leave the practitioner-voice in the two further articles that take a more ethnographic approach to the observation of two choreographers' processes.

Stephan Jürgens' *How to communicate on the verge of collapse* offers insight into João Fiadeiro's (Portugal) real-time composition and explores various studio-based works where language is present in 'multiple intermedial forms'. Jürgens' account, which touches on the labour of speaking on the verge of collapse after affecting states of exertion and exhaustion, draws attention to the struggle to perform, and in this case, speak. In this way speaking becomes imbued with issues of value, while also taking on a dramaturgical imperative.

Daniela Perazzo Domm's fascinating article, *The 'making' of movement and words: A po(i)etic reading of Charlotte Spencer's Walking Stories* is a surprisingly evocative account of Spencer's site-specific audio based performance work. Domm brings us back more explicitly to poetry and places the philosophical idea of poesis as central to it. She draws on Gadamer's and Ranciere's discussions of poesis and uses that to suggest that even the seemingly pedestrian and prosaic acts encountered through this participatory/immersive performance score, are revealed as poetic by exposing their 'ontological potential'. The participatory act of walking together forms a curious interplay of mediated voice and presence, charged also by the liveness of its inter-subjective and communal setting which produces a continual dialogue both with self, (inner speech) and self-with-others.

The issue closes with *Artefacts: a multi-voiced collection of paraphernalia, documentation and reflection on the Space and Words for Dancers work-week*. This magazine-style submission is a collaboration with a graphic designer and is a co-authored piece which includes, amongst other things, a poetic rationale for bringing words and dance together, written by Hanne; poetry by Hamilton and Hanne composed especially for this issue; a reflective piece by Antonio de la Fe on the nature of work for the dance artist as performer entitled *That You Took the Workshop Doesn't Mean You Have Done the Work*, a photo-essay by resident photographer Maria Andrews; as well as extracts from the transcript of *Evening Talk* collated around the headings: *On Poetry and Dance, On Space, On Making Pieces, On Repeating Pieces, and On How it Works*. The aim of *Artefacts* is to pull together some coordinates of the different and multifarious strands of

activity that went into and came out of the *Space and Words for Dancers* work-week in a way that might begin to perform and applaud the aesthetic quality of the work with space and words.

Indeed, the aim of this *Words and Dance* issue overall is to create space for words. To consider words in, through and around dance. To interrogate their potential value. And to value the way in which they have their beginnings in movement.

LABELLE, B., (2014). *Lexicon of the mouth: poetics and politics of voice and the oral imaginary*. A&C Black.

LAKOFF, G. and JOHNSON, M., (2008). *Metaphors we live by*. University of Chicago press.

SHEETS-JOHNSTONE, M., (2011). *The primacy of movement*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.