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**THE EDAM TEXT
Interpretation**



photo Ginelle Chagnon (dancers David Rancourt, Marc Boivin)

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INTRODUCTION

In 2000, following a sabbatical year, I decided to write down some thoughts about dance for whenever I would be invited to participate in a workshop or a teaching situation. This document comes out of this need to articulate the experience of dancing as I have discovered it. It simply states the ideas that have and still guide and support me whenever I dance and teach.

As rich as it may be, dance is, ephemeral by nature. Yet one might say rather un-ephemeral as well when considering how concretely dance can leave imprints in the body and mind. Still, I have known few endeavours to be as rooted in the present moment. It is in answer to this ephemeral nature that I decided to write down these thoughts. It is also because dance belongs to a world of the “non-said” and after letting the body talk for so long there is also a time to find words and the thoughts they carry. There comes with dancing an acute physical sensation of finding meaning where things exist, free of the confinement of definition, one foot in the quest for knowledge (akin to both science and the arts) and the other in the mysteries of the human experience (also akin to both the arts and science). But it is also possible to hide through movement. By accepting and opening up to such an expression of sensitivity as dance is, I find it necessary to measure up to it. While I do love both the steps of the quest for knowledge and the respect of mystery, some questions inevitably deserve attention, what do I rely on when I dance, what guides me consciously and less so, what are my references? By trying to identify these things I hope not to lose the magic of it but rather to go further into it.

I share this text in order to open up a dialogue. I thought it would be beneficial that I articulate the ideas and the concepts that will become references in our work together in the technique class, in the improvisation workshop and in the coaching sessions. The teaching of dance will always remain a personal synthesis of a multitude of principals and experiences (this is even truer now as techniques evolve and new knowledge is constantly introduced). As dancers we each compose the entirety of our training. As a teacher, I pass on what I understand and perceive so that you may better choose what is relevant for you.

This document was originally written for the EDAM summer intensive of 2000. Since then it has been regularly adjusted and rewritten. I have most often pulled it out and shared it at the EDAM summer intensive, hence the name that I enjoy using for the document, *The Edam Text*, somewhat in honour of Peter Bingham and Andrew Harwood who supported me while evolving with this work of putting words to dance and reserving time away from the chaos of daily life to do so.

INTERPRETATION

When thinking of the performance aspect of our work, whether in improvisation or in choreography, once more, I refer to my dancer's experience. When doing so it appears to me that some recurring ideas have guided me for a while, through all my dancing. These ideas are both of inner and outer sources; things that have "come up" from experience, and concepts that others have articulated and that I have integrated. As I present these to you some questions will follow certain ideas. These are questions that are guiding me, as much as the ideas themselves do.

Interpretation in the medium of dance is above all a physical activity. In the document that follows I have identified points of references to help guide us. Most of these refer to perceptions and understanding of the act of creation in the studio and of performance. However, interpretation in dance begins and ends with the physical experience. I state this offhand to remind myself, as we'll analyze the work intellectually, that nothing can replace the challenge and the richness of the physical work in the studio and on stage. Often, the simplest physical challenge will carry the highest poetic sense. As we'll aim to acquire tools for the creative work, the body's intelligence will always be our primary source of inspiration.

This being stated, after many years of performing experiences, I still find that it is the perceptions of ourselves, of what we do and how we do it that both grounds our work and gives it nuance. When preparing this class I have sought to break down these ideas into some form of order. These are:

1. Empowerment
2. Permission
3. Revealing
4. Dancer's proposition
5. Energy
6. Concentration and dilation
7. Censorship
8. Responsibility
9. Construction and composition (layering of pathways)

Many of these points (5, 6 and 7) I have borrowed to the best of my understanding from Eugenio Barba's work. As I discovered them through his explanations, I also discovered how deeply rooted these notions were in me, how inevitable they were and how much potential was opened to me for research after having been brought to perceive these.

1. Empowerment

As dancers we are chameleons. We make other creators' choices our own. It is our purpose to make those choices that are part of a whole choreographic vision become real, concrete. We are the material.

Everything about us is at play when we are working in the studio and performing on stage. In both of these creation situations (in the studio and on the stage) our aim as interpreters is to discover and translate "something which is already present, generated by the creative process", something we sense that hasn't yet taken form. It is up to us to make this something palpable, to interpret it, to communicate it. In order to achieve this we stay open in a state of attention. Attention is defined as "at tension", an availability to a yet to be created set of dramatic tensions. The open attention needed to face the unknown and to deliver is one of the vulnerabilities of the performer. Empowerment allows us this vulnerability: the courage not to place ourselves in a prepared or preconceived state of mind and body (something which would be defined as pre-tension, hence pretension).

The outside eye is an important part of our process. We constantly work through outside direction, in training, in creation and in front of the audience. As dancers we will also, always, be short of the ideal. Being of a live material, dance cannot be researched as a quest for perfection but only for a quality of process, for a presence. The ideal can be a source of inspiration, yet it can also carry illusions and a misguided sense of judgment.

All of these considerations have led me to make a sense of empowerment a priority. This sense is a private and intimate process for each performer but whatever the approach, it must be done. It is more difficult to give when we are asking (outside approval). It is better to have our own evaluation process, one that is not exclusive of outside commentaries, yet ultimately our responsibility.

This power is to be nurtured in all we do. Most of all, it is up to us to sense when we separate ourselves from it. Nurturing this sense of power does not defer in any mean from the different roles of the creator and the interpreter (the performer); these roles must be respected. Empowerment refers to the manner in which the research and the creation are done.

Focusing our attention on the job at hand, on the work to be done helps us maintain this empowerment. We can draw from our abilities and we can identify the challenges of needing new tools and acquiring them.

We clarify this point in us by asking these questions:

How would I define my dancing and my performing?

What is holding me back from a certain potential or interest?

What is the difference between my dance right now and the performing I am drawn to?

2. Permission

One of the most important qualities of the dancer is the ability to say yes without reserve or resistance, to view everything for the potential of it. This is one of our roles: to be in, and awaken permission. We are all seeking to realize ourselves and the main barrier is fear. Everything that we are, that we do and that we think, is inscribed in the body. As dancers we are working towards the access to this imprint. In yoga there is a directive to: "soften the boundaries". As we become empowered, this is the first consideration: to allow things to be, to permit. This process is the same both inwardly and outwardly, in us, in our movement, in our motivations and around us in our participation in the creative process. Sometimes saying yes is simply a state of mind; at other times it imposes that we physically appropriate a new use of the body or a new move. This is the work of the dancer in the creation process and of rehearsal in the studio. Later it will also be the work on the stage as this process of affirmation and willingness can be read by an audience and therefore shared with them. Often this will be a subtle state of presence, accompanying all of our preparation work for the stage. It will play on the stage as much as our performing choices themselves.

3. Revealing

To reveal, to borrow the words of Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, means to sense, to feel and to act (Sensing, Feeling, and Action). Once personal strength has been generated and permission has become the general focus, the process of revealing directs our attention. Performing is of another attention, one that is different than the readily accessible, habitual perception of things. Revealing is more about listening than about saying. As performers, what we sense and what we feel is revealed through our physical actions. This is a state that precedes meaning and message (another idea well defined by Eugenio Barba). It is a state of being, entirely about listening. Once again, the focus of this process of listening is both an inward and outward one. Inward listening refers to images, inspiration, physical sensations, and intellectual references. Outward listening refers to the space, others, everything that is present and a part of the creation.

4. Dancer's proposition

To create is to choose. Beyond the directives of choreographers there are a multitude of choices to be made. These constitute the dancer's artistry and craft. To affirm this contribution to the creative process creates a heightened challenge that, in effect, enlivens the three previous points. Unlike theater, where words carry references, dance is accustomed to the world of the "not said", the poetic openness that leaves room for the spectator's interpretation. Within these parameters exists the danger of confusing this openness with a lack of proposition. There is a world of difference between imposing and shying away. The word proposition in this context is be used for the impression this openness and process of choice leave in us when they are activated before dancing. It is our responsibility to propose and it is the choreographer's to choose, to select and to compose. When we feel empowered to participate in the creative

process and we open ourselves to allowing anything to happen and we listen attentively to the revealing aspect of the work it is up to us to go further and propose clarity of intention. The choreographer might not be in accord with this proposition in which case we simply look further. This is the difference between proposing and selecting, choosing. Of course in improvisation these roles are intermingled.

5. Energy

This is another most interesting facet of our work. Energy in dance must be generated yet contained; a high vibration in a controlled, directed use. Again, this is something that has been much documented by Eugenio Barba. We have all noticed how energy can be transformed, one of the most obvious way being through the adrenaline. Another way is by the expense of energy as a way to activate more of it. This is part of the “warm-up” preparation: to heat up the muscles, to fire up the nervous system, to oxygenate the fluids all the way to each cell. Energy isn’t about bold action but about intense readiness, presence. The generosity of the performer is often linked to this capacity to overcome whatever state of mind and body is at hand in order to awaken one physically and mentally. There are a multitude of tools to achieve this; they all aim to facilitate the bridge between everyday “aches and pains”, and the expectations of the creative activity, the dance.

Although a certain continuity in technical training and preparation strategies allow for a deeper understanding, there are often a variety of “systems of presence” to be awakened before a performance and before a particular creation process. This means listening in the body and mind and then balancing what is present with what is lacking.

Another aspect of energy is about that which is found in the space. It is the dancer's role to sense what the “energy of the moment” is and find a way to be present to it in the most dynamic way. Creating challenges for ourselves and meeting them generates energy. This starts with being “passionately” involved and “witnessing” with perspective both at the same time. Being dynamic can mean anything from providing a simple supportive presence to offering a counterpoint proposition, all the way to proposing a disturbing action or state. As we have discussed in the notion of “creating dynamic oppositions” in the technical section of this document, this sensing work precedes composition. In improvisation the sensing work and the composition occur almost instantaneously; in choreography, the sensing work refers back to the idea of propositions, something that often precedes the choices of interpretation.

Questions to help identify our relationship to energy:

How do you prepare for working on a regular basis?

How do you prepare for the stage?

What are the different systems of presence that you call upon?

6. Concentration and dilation

We have seen how the dancer is an alchemist. Much of the dancer's work has to do with a process of inner chemistry. Everything is allowed in as we go wilfully through a dark night; this experience is processed within us changing our chemistry; finally it is redirected outward in a new form, a transposed expression. An analogy for this process occurs in everyday life situations, where we feel this chemistry happening in us: all emotions are integrated, digested and redirected out. In rehearsal and in creation, this process is consciously activated, and heightened with the stress of performance.

The performer's strength comes from her/his ability to both concentrate inward and dilate outward. Once more this process is well explained by Eugenio Barba. In dance this is most fascinating as it can be accomplished through concrete, direct application. Muscle energy draws in toward the center of the body, hugging the bones; this allows the lines of directions to be projected outward. Every form has a center of mass from which all directions are active; it is our work to find this center. The more the pull-in is active, the more the directing-out can have confidence; the more the reach-out is dynamic the more the center is challenged, and therefore strengthened.

Concentration and dilation: one is the result of the other; one serves the other. This physical concept also represents a fundamental creative idea: we move into self to be, and we move from this center to participate, to do; one is the challenge of the other. This is one of the rules for performing: that of gathering energy so deeply into center that the body and mind become open spaces, meeting places, between dancer, choreographer and spectator, between the functions of movement and the form of the choreography.

Managing the ego is another step toward the process of concentration and dilation. It is mainly a way for opening the perceptions. The practice of sometimes seeking personal absence in movement helps diffuse the imposition of habitual conceptions. Listening to possibilities inspires trust in the choreography. It is the drawing of a blank canvas in order to better choose colors and textures, to better identify the work of being an interpreter. Understanding how the choreography stands on its own is an important tool for the dancer: this detachment is primordial to the creative input and the craftsmanship of the dancer. The dancer allows all components that make the dance what it is, become clear. These components are the ones that will be addressed in part 9 of this text, Construction and composition.

In Karen Kain's words, there are cold and hot moments in performing and it is useful for us to identify these. The hot moments refers to instances of grace and intense inspiration, cold moments refer to moments of concrete execution, often so challenging that the performer must gather all her/his concentration to achieve them. The idea of hot and cold also refers to the notion that the subjectivity of the dancer sensing her/his performance isn't always in accordance to the perception of the audience. In this, trust in the choreography and the rehearsal process is most important.

Questions:

How can I apply this notion at different point of my day from the technical training, through the creative process all the way to the stage?

What changes when I support this activity?

7. Censorship

Censorship refers to point 2, permission although at a more “active” level. Censorship is a subtle thing; most often it is always at work within us even in minute ways. This stems from the fear of the unknown, the fear of bringing to light perceptions that are potentially challenging or disturbing, both to the audience and us. This is why censorship operates, by nature, contrary to the artistic process. As performers, it is important to undo this process in us. A first step in doing so is to move away from the notion that our performing is only about us. It is impossible for us not to be an integral part of the creation, and it certainly is enriching to delve into our experience in order to feed the work, but it is necessary to move beyond this.

In the Satori teachings, an age-old Zen meditation structure based around the koans, it is said about the question «Who am I?»: «It isn't so much finding that counts but seeing how we manage to constantly escape it.» The «it», referred to, is the movement of openness. This openness is what is present in all art: this playing with form, this twisting of “reality”, in order to unveil new perceptions. The definition of who we are in “real life” is unnecessary to hold onto when it comes to performing just as we have a responsibility to make role-playing a craft and a game to be exposed.

Questions:

What is my sense of censorship; is there something that appeals to me but is difficult to embody?

How do I use my face as an _expression?

How do I use my eyes and my focus?

Could I push my craft, my physical capacities, to defy my personal censorship?

8. Responsibility

This point refers back to empowerment. Once we start to identify our work and our motivations for doing it, it becomes clearer and clearer that we are responsible for our development. It is deeply set in us to be waiting for propositions, projects, ideal work situations and roles in a creation. While this waiting is partly inevitable, we can concentrate on what is at hand, and apply ourselves to this.

Whenever we follow through on desires (in any situation), it is inevitable that the status quo, both within us and around us will be disturbed; this brings energy, concentration and dilation. We support what we need to disturb. We need to stay present to what we challenge. This can be experienced with partners on stage as well as in the creation process. It requires that we define ourselves with inner rules while participating with others.

9. Construction and composition (the layering of pathways)

All previous points being guidelines, this 10th point is about the actual craft of the interpreter. There can be identified a list of components to the dance, and it is our job to refine the clarity of these components for ourselves and for the audience. This requires much work and craftsmanship. Working is the best way to ground us; it is a generally accepted notion that all preparation well exceeds what appears in any final product.

The components of a dance are: (to be completed)

A

The treatment of the piece (realist, formal, intellectual, satirical etc.)

The nature of the context

The encounter with the collaborators.

The references to the sources of inspiration (from what world is the choreographer or improviser inspiring him/herself?). As dancers we can inform ourselves about previous work relating to the interest of the creation, work of artist, philosophers, writers, scientists, etc. in order to guide our choices.

B

Form

Intention

Dynamics

Textures (a body which is hard, supple, tense, nervous etc.)

Posture

Breathing

Negative space (potent space)

Scenic space

Music

Ambient sound

Sets and props

Costume

Lighting

The rapport to others

The eyes, the focus

The face

C

What is my challenge in this work situation?

Of what nature is the risk involved in this creation?

How can I answer all the previous questions in relation to this chosen work?

Conclusion

In the creative situation, there is always a risk that we need to identify. It will be later transposed through our presence on stage, not only physically, but also through the challenge of personal involvement. This can be manifested as a distinctive physical challenge, a vulnerable state, the rise of a strong disturbing proposition, a drastic change of style, a deep personal exchange between collaborators, etc. Whatever the unsettling energy is, it is best to identify it in order to better meet it; it is most often in this meeting that the greatest inspiration guides us.

In this same train of thought there is also the rhythm of the creative process which is important to recognize. All creations will have times of discovery, of excitement but also of nebulous searching that sometimes appears disturbing. All of those periods are part of the process and the dancer is responsible for supporting the nature of each period. It is most often impossible to foresee how any creative process will result into a final product; trust and support are key factors for any creative work.

All these components must be addressed. The list being extensive, it allows us to focus our concentration each day with both continuity and variance. This discipline in the process of working is also one of the best tools to counterbalance the stress of performing; it focuses the mind on the experience, on the reality of it. This is an aspect of the layering of pathways; each one of the components listed above provides a communication, a pathway offered to the audience. The challenge in communicating is in how it is done.

I have identified these issues from a dancer's perspective, primarily from within choreographic work. However, all of these considerations also apply to improvisation, which is instantaneous choreography, moment-to-moment composition.

As a final note, and after rereading this text, I would like to conclude with the X factor. Beyond all these ideas, and the attempts at clarifying them, there is always a place for something that is out of our control: the unknown, grace, whatever we call it; it is the final ingredient, and maybe, the one that needs the most room. So, to balance these words I remind myself that it is all a game, to be played and enjoyed.

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