



Statement of intent for the Bachelor of Contemporary Dance at the Manufacture, Lausanne

“I think that one of the reasons I got involved in dance is to finish my movement development. Because I have a hunger to find and to finish and to explore. To do essentially what babies do when they begin to move. A hunger to find out more of what movement is or can be. I think it provides a service to keep the search alive, in a culture which has engineered an environment which requires physical and sensorial suppression to exist in. (...) Essentially urban civilization has cut us off from movement- and sensorial development which would occur in a natural environment. (...) It is appalling how we disuse the body. Dance reminds us about that. Dance explores some of the physical possibilities; dance refocuses our focusing mind on very basic existence, and time, space, gravity open up to creativity. This seems to me a reminder of nature, our nature, and as such it provides a service to us in our physical doldrums. It’s a wake-up call to deadened urbanites, a stimulus to work-habituated bodies, a promise to developing children. (...)” (Steve Paxton)

A plea for the body and for dance

I would like to start this statement of intent by a short and certainly simplified historical introduction, without any academic ambition, which aims at placing dance in a wider cultural context.

Beyond any artistic concerns, dance has accompanied humanity for a long time, perhaps from the very beginning. Dance has been there as a spontaneous expression, as a unique mode of relating to the body, society, and the world.

Under the spell of culture, our dominant culture (Judeo-Christianism, Cartesianism, and more fundamentally the development of specialized and hierarchical societies) our natural and intuitive relation to the body has changed. Within a dualistic perspective of the human being, the body is subjected to the mind and relegated to the role of mere vehicle. Under the influence of philosophical and theological representations of the world, the body has become the mere conveyor of a spiritual or intellectual unity - the soul or the mind.

In our times, science has theoretically erased the body and soul dichotomy. There is no such thing as an entity - a mind, a spirit, or a conscience - separated from the body. Actually, "I am a body".

Nevertheless, the hierarchy of the "sublime mind" over the "primitive body" still plays a crushing role. The relationship our societies maintain with the body generates a problematic series of representations and experiences of it, which are exploited by the market - idealized and fetishistic images of sexuality and of sport. This instrumentalization helps nourishing a growing suspicion towards the body as well as reinforcing these old hierarchies.

The fact that dance is still a marginalized practice within Western culture - certainly if compared to language based practices - is symptomatic of such a cultural construction of the human. By prioritizing structural, linguistic, or symbolic forms of communication, we put dance and all other forms of bodily explorations that do not focus on productivity and obedience, and which have no commercial goal, in a subordinate position.

During the 19th and the 20th centuries a new movement emerged which has stressed the importance of the body and its senses. This movement considered the human being as a complex physical organism from which emerged our consciousness, intelligence, and intuition. This movement also rejected the Judeo-Christian instrumentalization of the body. Among others - and I'm not a specialist in this subject - are Friedrich Nietzsche (the body as an "I in action"), Walt Whitman, as well as Isadora Duncan and Rudolf Von Laban, two artist that introduced a radically new relation to the body - a free body.

Unfortunately this revolutionary movement was also distorted and instrumentalized, this time by Fascism and Nazism (e.g. the politico-aesthetical body of Leni Riefenstahl), which led to the dismissal of those new ideas in their totality, rather than only in their distorted, fascist variation. The suspicion towards a greater integration of the body in the representation of the human being has therefore been reinforced, for different reasons.

Of course a cultural resistance to traditional hierarchies has continued to affirm itself, most notably through the sexual revolution and the postmodern deconstruction, and has found very rich expressions in the choreographic field. However, the body is still regarded with suspicion, or at least with distrust and disinterest.

I think it might be useful to revive the radical premises of the above-mentioned creators and philosophers, because dance can bring

to the general culture, and more precisely to art, a holistic approach to the body and the world. Dance is an art in which the body in motion plays a key role in experimenting, discovering, understanding, and communicating; it explores and highlights the relationship between human beings and the world. It is able to make this alliance perceptible.

Forming artists in the field of dance today

Most contemporary choreographers expect dancers to participate actively in the artistic process. They request them to be flexible and creative in their relation both to art and the world. They are asked to be engaged in the research, have a taste for experimentation, and a permanent curiosity. Dancers are no longer the performers of a given material but rather experts that offer their knowledge, their know-how, and their creativity to the artistic process by taking responsibility both for their own movement materials as well as to the artwork as a whole. This role is certainly not new but is not yet sufficiently reflected neither in dance training nor in the image dancers have of themselves.

Moreover, a contemporary dancer must be autonomous regarding his/her training and physical development, for companies that offer daily training are rare nowadays. Most choreographers no longer work in this model, and it doesn't correspond to the present economic reality of the field. Nowadays, dancers often have short term contracts in very different sorts of projects which asks of them a higher autonomy and discipline in managing their own instrument, their body.

In my opinion, it is essential that dancers learn by themselves how to develop and expand their physical capacities, their virtuosity - in the largest sense of the term. Mastering and developing their bodies must become evident for them, for it is the basis of their own creativity and artistic contribution.

The dancer's training

I am deeply convinced that in the context of contemporary dance, training must be detached from historical dance styles and techniques. A contemporary training should not be based on specific artistic trends but rather on the body's anatomic possibilities and its infinite capacity for movement.

We know from experience that bodies are able to learn particular movements by repeating them. It is as if a movement became imprinted, deeper with each repetition, in the body's memory, which installs certain capacities and strengths. The result is a series of naturalized patterns - habits - which the body becomes more likely to follow. This process is very useful, even vital, but can also limit the body's creativity.

The effectiveness of many traditional dance classes is undeniable. A lot of useful abilities can be taught. Nevertheless, the daily repetition of certain movement patterns and movement qualities can become an obstacle in a contemporary creative process, for it interferes with the artistic freedom of both dancers and choreographers.

Because most of the dance styles are defined by a range of specific co-ordinations, forms, and movement qualities that reflect the artistic ideals of the artists who developed them, dancers have been, and still are, trained following "techniques" that teach them to move according to preexisting aesthetic ideals. Unless the history of dance is a specific reference in a given choreographic work, these above mentioned patterns are not relevant.

The increase of physical strength along with the fine-tuning of movement coordination which traditional dance techniques may help developing are certainly necessary. The problem is that dancers are being taught to feel safe only when performing familiar forms or movements, which they can mentally control. There are nevertheless a lot of ways to prepare a body for movement in a creative and safe environment. Rather than simplifying a move until it becomes "comprehensible", we should facilitate for dancers to reach a state of alertness, a kind of "dynamic sensitivity", which would engage the body's reflexes - and thus a trust in these reflexes. The body naturally possesses a huge practical knowledge of its anatomy and mechanics, its actions, reactions and interactions with exterior forces (such as gravity, centrifugal and centripetal forces, other bodies, etc.). Through our senses we are able to apprehend and evaluate our movements continuously - an experience which requires a global awareness of the body through time and space - and to immediately make use of this information to react and create.

This integrated and global physical sensitivity allows for much more complex ways of moving (forms and qualities), for even if our attention is limited to a few elements at a time, our body is able to combine a greater quantity of physical information through a fluid sense of orientation. This sensitivity allows for dancers and choreographers to access the creative potential of physical intuition - a creativity that emerges from purely physical

circumstances without the need of a conscious thought being formed between the moment of "inspiration" and the realization of a movement.

Because they enable students to develop a great array of abilities, traditional "techniques" - from Classical Ballet to Cunningham- or Graham-, Release-technique, or Contact-Improvisation, as well as Kung Fu, Flamenco or African dances - should still have a place in a contemporary dance pedagogical curriculum. However, they have to be taught in a manner in which students can fully access the context of their historical development as well as their contemporary status. They are not enough in themselves and cannot serve as the basis of a dancer's education. A movement technique which gives access to the body's full potential and enables the dancer to adapt to all sorts of environments by showing and developing responsibility and creativity, has to be separated from any particular style; it has to be based on the body's mechanics and its anatomic movement potentials.

An exercise developing a particular ability can obviously assume different forms. Rather than spending time memorizing and practicing a defined choreographic fragment, we can work on different abilities through the use of improvisational tasks. Such an improvisational task can be thought in a way as to challenge the dancer away from its habits. While new choreographic fragments are constantly created and explored, dancers develop a way of thinking movement, which is highly valuable in a choreographic process. Proposing an adjustment to the way dancers see their role in a creative process, this technical approach teaches them how to access a greater extend of their bodies' creative potential in action and interaction.

To practice is to create. To re-create, for its part, is not necessarily to create and it is not always the most efficient practice. Considering the time and energy required to obtain and maintain a high degree of mastering of one's movement, it seems essential to use the body as the wonderfully sophisticated organism that it is and focus on developing creative processes which expand dance and choreography beyond its limits, rather than on re-creating movement following preexisting patterns.

Each student should also be incited to consider the technical training as an individual path motivated by the desire to develop relentlessly both one's body control and creativity. For most part, dance courses are provided as an identical program for a whole group. I think it is important that technical work also integrates some individualized and personal training. Each student has a different physicality, a different set of experiences, and a

different point of view; therefore it is important that each dancer can build on his/her own instrument.

Dance training could benefit from the format in which musicians train: musicians meet their teachers regularly but also practice a lot on their own. This approach demands a higher degree of responsibility from the students and would imply an adaptation in the structure of a dance formation. Group classes surely remain important, but we must also offer each student the possibility to take time to digest information and to develop individually according to their needs, strengths, and weaknesses.

The specific creativity of the dancer

I believe that dance education should be based on what the art form specifically has to offer to both art and culture: a holistic approach of the body. The medium of dance is the body. In order to encourage the particular creativity of this incredibly sophisticated organism, we should provide the future dancer or choreographer with an education, which integrates the physical, sensorial, and intellectual dimensions of the human being.

A dancer is usually firstly attracted to dance because of the sensual pleasure of moving. It's a way of getting in touch with the world by moving. This pleasure is at the root of a dancer's primary motivation and it is there that a great share of his/her talent and gift are based on. A dance school should stimulate this particular relation to the world, which is in contrast with the representations of the body as constructed in our Western cultures. It is there where dance can be innovative and subversive: as an art form which integrates all the facets of the human being, without rigid hierarchies, in its undertaking of perceiving the world and communicating with it. Rather than subjecting the senses to consciousness, dance is an art form, which allows us to understand and enhance the potential of the body as a whole, including non-conscious processes. The unconscious is usually associated with negative terms such as trauma or repression, but it is also an important cognitive function that is crucial for any of our actions. Our experiences, our memories, are somehow integrated in us, and it is often via the unconscious, through intuition that they become useful and help us to perceive, find our way, make decisions or communicate with others.

Non-conscious processes always precede consciousness, whose glorification relies on a misunderstanding of how the human being functions. This is what dance knows and expresses. The artistic approach of dance training should nurture this knowledge, rather

than place conscious thinking in the foreground. Thinking should be treated as inextricably connected to the unconscious, to intuition, to movement and to the sensations - that's to say to the body as a whole - in interaction with the world.

It is crucial that the teaching of theory joins this approach. Theoretical classes should not be primarily used as references to build up starting points or contents for choreographic works. Choreography is not a means to translate theoretical ideas but instead, it should develop from its own specific knowledge and mode of relating to the world. Theory is based on experience, it analyses what already exists and this relation should not be reversed. A work of art should not be created in order to fit into a predetermined history but instead to create it. Artistic creation should not be subjected to theory, a temptation which is certainly very strong given that dance is an undervalued medium in a culture that privileges the mind and language. Too much emphasis on theory, which could place intellectual processes at the center of dance, would simply re-install and re-enforce the hierarchies between mind and body and, as a result, dance might lose what makes it unique and precious.

It is important that students understand that this hierarchy is culturally and historically constructed and how it still operates nowadays. It is equally important that theory teachers - and theory classes remain essential in order to contextualize artistic activity - see themselves as part of this specific holistic approach. And it is important that the school chooses those teachers based on their capacity to stimulate this specificity.

It is essential that students understand the history of dance, as well as the history of art in general, and are able to link them to philosophy, politics and culture. It is essential to understand that each thing we do, that each action that is performed is inscribed in the world - but without reducing it to simplified schemas that would not take into consideration its complexity. The artist must inscribe her/himself in the world with all sincerity in relation to her/his personality, her/his past, her/his talents, her/his motivations. A sociology course could be very important, but may be less influential than an experience in a cooperative development project in the field. The relation an artist has with the world must be lived and living, engaged rather than exclusively theoretical.

As a result, creativity may be stimulated by directly working with the matter at hand, instead of starting from intellectual concepts. In the case of dance, the central matter is the body itself, but it could be certainly useful to invite the students to explore other

matters, visual or sonorous for example, in their multiple sensual dimensions.

Especially in a dance school, it is essential to communicate and to defend a real pride of the uniqueness and specificity of the dancer, the artist perpetually occupied with living the world through the body. Her/his medium is certainly not valued in our culture, and her/his talent may not help him/her to develop powerful verbal communication skills; but dance is nevertheless irreplaceable and must be nourished in a world more than ever dominated by language and image.

The relation to the other living arts

While dance must recognize and nourish its particular relation with the world, which gives it its specific value, it certainly can also interact with other disciplines.

Music is obviously an art with which dance is intimately connected. The association between the two is ancient and seemingly evident. It is as if they were two different expressions of our desire to give our experience of time and space a form, an order. An infinite creative potential lies in the analogies as well as in the specificities and interactions between those two forms of expression. Dancers can learn much from musicians; both from composers and performers, through the notions of rhythm and melody, tension and suspension, harmony and counterpoint, consonance and dissonance, etc.

I see the coexistence of the dance and theater departments in the same building as a great opportunity. Within their specificities, which must be preserved and stimulated, the disciplines can meet to share and learn from each other, to exchange knowledge and know-how - ways of knowing and communicating about the world.

Working with interdisciplinarity, transversality, and artistic fluidity does not imply disregarding the specificity of a discipline but rather stimulates deepening it to meet other disciplines and explore the fertile and interfering fringes between them. In order to displace the borders of an artistic form, one must first know it well from the inside... But if no discipline imposes preeminence over another, they can only gain in knowing, meeting, and fertilizing each other.

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