

INTERPRETATION AND IDENTITY:

a preoccupation I share with John Cage

Late in his career the iconoclastic American composer and thinker John Cage became fascinated by what he termed the identity of a composition and the question of how that identity was maintained in spite of radical differences in interpretation. With that in mind, many of his later works were published with alternatives for instrumentation. I have also pondered that question, though in relation to choreography, for most of my dance life, and I have come to some interesting and even remarkable conclusions.

North Star / Lar Lubovitch

The issue first arose for me in 1981 when, as a new member of the Lar Lubovitch Dance Company, I was given the chance to take on a brief, brilliant solo Lar had created on Laura Gates as part of the dance *North Star*. When I went to learn it, I had seen the solo many times on stage, in rehearsal, and from the wings, and part of its devastating impact for me was the impression that the solo was a pure expression of the dancer herself. I couldn't imagine anyone else dancing it. I couldn't fathom what the steps could possibly be, how they might be defined or broken down. Even though Laura was an active member of the company, Lar taught me the solo himself, and I remember being surprised that he knew exactly how to describe and demonstrate the movement. Some movements that seemed well defined for me when I watched Laura turned out to be more the by-products of intended gestures, movements that took place in the aftermath of prescribed choreography. It wasn't that Laura had changed the dance, it was simply that when she engaged in the choreography it produced other movements as well, and I was directed to start with the primary choreographic gesture myself and allow it to take an authentic pathway through my own body.

The other revelation for me in learning and performing this solo was the transformation I experienced by being inside the choreographic structure. I can describe that best by saying that I did not master the solo, in the sense of perfecting a way to perform the movements, but that the dance mastered me. If I gave myself over to the explicit demands of the movement event that Lar had crafted, it made of me the dancer that was needed to perform it.

Non Coupable / Paul-André Fortier

I had another experience key to this issue in learning *Non Coupable*, a solo created by Paul-André Fortier for Susan Macpherson in 1983. In this case, I learned the dance directly from Susan before being coached by Paul-André. Once again I learned that while for Susan the dance was subjective, encompassing her entire movement life inside it, for Paul-André it was a more explicit and objective composition. Susan taught me the movement with great clarity in relation to the inner monologue that drove the choreographic language for her. By contrast, Paul-André emphasized a particular kind of engagement in very specific physical tasks. *Non Coupable* is acknowledged as a masterpiece of solo choreography. Its rawness and stunted physicality had initially gone very much against the grain of

Susan's expansive, lyrical, and dramatically charged style, but she conquered its challenges so completely that it became her signature work. I would have to start all over, with the same set of challenges that had been presented to Susan, and to meet them in my own way. Her solutions would not answer my needs in embodying the dance. In the end, I believe that none of the many performances I gave of *Non Coupable* in the few years following that 1990 reconstruction did the dance justice. Sixteen years later, and after two large scale projects of my own with Paul-André, I went back to *Non Coupable* and was finally able to fully inhabit the world he had created.

Ten Suggestions / Mark Morris

In 1990 I was invited to join Mark Morris and Mikhail Baryshnikov's *White Oak Dance Project* for its inaugural season. Among the many extraordinary gifts of that time for me was sharing a part with Baryshnikov in a charming solo called *Ten Suggestions*. Mark had made *Ten Suggestions* for himself in 1981 and I had seen the first performance at the old Dance Theatre Workshop in New York. I went home from that concert and wrote a poem that captures the touching, virtuosic, campy essence of the performance:

*The man in the pink silk pajamas was spectacular;
Casals playing in the light of Liberace's candelabra.
I saw Nijinsky dance in 1981.*

Mark is a great big guy, soft and floppy and flamboyant. He tosses off impressive turns and balances with the greatest of ease and he is supremely musical. Misha is like a greyhound, small and perfectly proportioned. He is lean and muscular, and there is nothing he can't do well. One of the greatest classical dancers of all time, he is handsome and sexy to boot. I am a tallish, angular modern dancer, somewhat androgynous. My proportions are odd, but somehow everything balances out. Depending on the dance, I tend toward extremes of either cool abstraction or deep emotion.

It was an unusual choice for Mark to cast both Misha and me in a solo he had made for himself. With no basis for comparison, because of the drastic contrasts among us, I realized that I had been in the habit of comparing myself to other dancers rather than thinking of myself purely in relation to the choreography.

Picture this: for the very first step of the dance you wait several bars, then suddenly appear from the up right wing, pull off as many pirouettes as you can in a couple of counts and then drop to a crouch. Any choreographer would dream of having Mikhail Baryshnikov for a moment like that. But whatever Misha did, I was going to have to treat it differently, because I've never gotten around more than three times in my entire career. The immediate and enduring lesson on that one was to focus on the dance and to consider and explore ways in which to meet the challenges of the choreography, rather than lamenting my inability to choose options that are only available to others.

I also got a better sense of the fact that sometimes it is simply the physique of a dancer that makes something work in a particular way. Mark's lush bulk was splendid for the Duncanesque dance with a

ribbon. Misha was so low and compact for the somersault / crouch phrase that it read like the kind of optical illusion a clown uses to squash his height. And my extra long arms were perfect for the deco sequence with the hoop. You can't compete with that kind of thing, you can only think of it as a gift in terms of the dance.

Mark was incredibly generous in the way that he rehearsed Misha and me, taking tremendous pleasure in seeing the dance reinvented by each of us. One of my strongest memories from those rehearsals is of Mark, head thrown back, laughing his wild cackle over the delightful beauty, or crazy out-of-character look of some moment. Misha loved to talk things over with me. How did I approach this or that, what did I think of the way he had chosen to do something. Was I aware of having lost some detail or of having changed something he thought worked well. That same openness and curiosity was sustained through the performances as we supported each other with a comment or question and continued to observe each other's work with interest and appreciation.

The Choreographer's Trust

When I established The Choreographer's Trust in 2002, one of my major preoccupations was with disentangling the choreographic score of the dances I had created from my own dancing, with establishing what John Cage referred to as the identity of the composition. The Trust entailed teaching each of six dances to two very different dance artists, in some cases creating entirely new costume, set, or lighting designs to support their interpretation. I have emerged from that process with a very clear perspective on the issue of identity in relation to choreography. My philosophy is that the choreographic score is a construct that is distinct from its performance. I think of the choreographic score as less complex, nuanced, virtuosic, and subjective than any outstanding individual performance of it, but also as more open-ended, flexible, precise, and objective than all of the performances it will ever receive.

Mindful of the possibility of confusing choreography with interpretation, we need to be sure that we are working toward the reconstruction of a choreography, rather than the replication of a performance. We need to appreciate that each dancer will develop their role in distinct ways since the choreographic score is brought to life through the unique spirit and physicality of that artist. We can afford to be daring in our casting choices, because as choreographers we cannot anticipate the full range of possibilities for interpreting one of our dances. And we can trust that the success of the dance does not rely solely on the dancer. Great choreography has the power to transform a dancer, making of them what they need to be.