

## Notes on Gender

More and more, I am becoming aware of a tension between my performative explorations of gender and my reflections on gender in my professional life as a choreographer. The first are embodied and seem to be getting somewhere; the second, though equally revealing, seem to go nowhere fast.

As a choreographer, I began to explore gender by snagging on a physical hook through physical happenstance. I was working on a solo called *Ach, Rosalie!* and I began to notice how extremely subtle shifts in my sternum, sacrum, jaw, and hands made for large visible differences in character. Not only that, but they made a character *gendered*, whether I intended it or not. I was fascinated by the way movement appeared so readily gendered, by how skillful we are in experiencing and reading movement as male or female. I began to play with this distinction, to examine it more closely, to do "fieldwork". Sometimes I would choose a man on the street and follow him home, trying to imitate his movement as closely as possible. I was curious to know what it felt like to be in a body that moved in that way. More accurately, I wondered what it felt like to be in a body that was *in the world* in that way.

I wasn't really interested in impersonation or flat-out drag. Rather, I saw gender as a tool for creating meaning, a way to shade or color movement so as to deepen how it might be interpreted by a viewer. I was intrigued by how the genderedness of movement could help it to say something larger in a work. I began to explore "channel flipping" from one gender to another (in *Ach Rosalie!* I shifted by choreographic jump-cuts from a coy, promiscuous female body to an aggressive, workman-like male body and back again); metamorphosis from one gender to another (in *Athena, Goddess of Wisdom* I morphed slowly from a gnarled, gesticulating, medieval male body to a caricatured *femme fatale* body); and superposition of gender so that two genders exist simultaneously in one character (a site-specific solo on the Gowanus Canal superimposed the bodies of a male mobster and a homeless prostitute).

For me these games are not only movement puzzles; they excavate the question 'what is it like to be female or male? I'm not an essentialist; I don't mean to suggest that there's only *one* thing it is to be female or male or that it's the same in all cases. Rather I want to probe the question, to discover from the inside what it feels like to be this particular thing at this time and place. And to discover the implications and nuances of those feelings--the relations to power, violence, language, sexuality, and other social codes. How does a person embodied in this specific way get what he or she wants? I discovered that for Rosalie her body was her only bargaining chip. I discovered that men sit on the subway differently because they lack some of the fears and vulnerabilities that women have. I discovered that there's power in being slimy.

I am writing this on the heels of creating a new work-- *Pulling the Wool: An American Landscape of Truth and Deception*, a multi-media performance installation involving dance, live music, video, and sculptural elements. At the three hour performances, I played a kind of circus ringmaster, holding the space and its carnival-like contents together in a constantly morphing mixed-gendered body. Less androgyne more hermaphrodite, I was dressed in a corset wrapped with ace bandages and a sleazy white polyester suit, reflecting a body that was often simultaneously male and female, sliding

more heavily in one direction or the other but continually in flux. I was depraved and crippled, roaming the space-- whispering cabaret singer monologues about truth and deception, bursting into unpredictable renditions of iconic American speeches (JFK's inaugural address, MLK's "I Have a Dream" speech, and Lincoln's Gettysburg Address), sweeping the large gymnasium with the movements of an evangelical preacher, or letting my body become a battlefield for toy soldiers or plastic cowboys and Indians. In each of these modes, I was more male or female not by design but as if by the dictates of the material itself. The MLK speech found its way out through a hard-boiled low-ranking female politician body; the Gettysburg Address through a top-heavy male preacher body which sometimes switched to a crawling southern belle in need of healing. The cabaret singer was four parts female, one part Joel Grey. And the JFK material seemed so sadly cynical that it was only a drunken male body that could deliver those words. These weren't calculated choices, but that is not to say they were arbitrary. They were choices that *found* me.

Gender permeates everything. In the simplest cases, it conditioned the interpretations of these characters and affected whether audience members found them funny or pitiable, jarring or affecting. But it pervaded the material in a deeper way. *Pulling the Wool* was largely about information and deception: how truth is "constructed" in our society, what makes us believe what we believe. I began looking at these issues through the lens of news media and eventually political speeches and preaching. But I started to long for a more visceral way of dealing with the subject. I wanted to physicalize the desire for truth, the desire to get under the surface. I began working with images of self-dissection, exploring the idea of cutting into oneself to find what lies under the skin, to unleash the true body in all its reality and grotesqueness.

These experiments resulted in a section of the piece in which I wear a camisole and panty made of flesh-colored pantyhose and lie face up splayed out over a metal trough. I cut into the pantyhose with a big metal shears, so that breasts and pubic hair ooze out through the openings, a clear statement of femaleness. What began as a gender-neutral statement about truth became completely colored by the female body--- it was suddenly not only about searching but also inevitably about violence, silence, sexuality, and sadism.

I had no choice but to accept the femaleness of the exploration, and in doing so it took on new meaning, even for me. I began to see myself as the body of this country, a metaphorical body of ideals, principles, hopes, and rights, a body that is currently undergoing surgery. To perform this body I could only be myself. And to be myself in this case I could only be female. Ironically, through being female-- viscerally female-- I began to see the material in such a way that made me feel even *more* viscerally female. The feedback loop of art and life.

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I first noticed gender professionally when I was studying analytic philosophy. Academic philosophy has evolved since then, and even in the state in which I encountered it, it was far from the worst example of gender injustice in the academic world. Still, it was typical to be the only woman in a seminar of men-- to be dismissed, or ignored, or forced to defend myself in a world where most people were oblivious to gender politics and

"simply making a philosophical point." I consider myself lucky. I only saw the tip of the iceberg. Many experienced much worse.

As a result, I initially viewed gender issues in dance through the lens of academic gender politics. I was accustomed to a world where women were discriminated against because they were a professional minority and elevated as a social novelty in a socially inept world. By contrast, modern dance always seemed a world of women-- the domain carved out by a handful of hard-edged, charismatic matriarchs. Sure there was Ted Shawn, but I always thought of the men of modern dance as mere side-kicks.

But training in dance is different from being a professional choreographer, and when I entered the choreographic rat race I was disabused of my illusions. I was shocked to learn that so many of the people controlling choreographers' fates are men. I was shocked by the preferential treatment and the ways men are ushered into the role of "golden boy" by men and women alike. And I was even more shocked by the fact that here unlike in philosophy, where women constituted an overwhelming majority, they didn't fare any better.

We all know the litany of complaint: that men in the "downtown dance world" are produced more, paid more, have far more reason to live in hope than their female counterparts. We know the statistics. The Gender Project has done a lot to bring these to the awareness of the dance community. Everyone keeps asking "why?". Yet where does all this talk get us?

We can publicize statistics, but entrenched behaviors are behind those statistics, and changing behavior is a fine-grained process. As a development consultant in the arts, I see a marked difference in the behavior of men and women, similar to the differences I saw teaching undergraduate philosophy. In my experience, many men exhibit a greater sense of entitlement and a greater ability to "put themselves out there"; many are more willing to go out on professional and financial limbs. It seems an offensive cliché, but clichés are born of something.

These practices inevitably affect art-making in our society. Many male choreographers more readily exhibit what is traditionally recognized as "ambition" at earlier stages of their careers. Larger scale work, higher production values, financial risk, are all more likely to lead to professional reward. The demands on presenters and funders, both male and female, make this understandable. A presenter has money to raise, seats to fill, an audience to address. A profound solo exploration by a female choreographer in a small basement may have tremendous artistic integrity but will be a more difficult choice for even the most consciousness-raised presenter. Funders too need to see the greatest impact for their limited resources, to justify their decisions to authorities who may or may not understand the subtleties of the art form, and to seek security in projects that are also sanctioned by other institutions.

So what do we do? More letters to the editor of the *New York Times*? Perhaps philosophy immunized me against the power of argument, but I see this discussion going in circles, sapping our energy, missing the personal nature of the change that needs to occur. Shall we raise public consciousness so that, in the name of grappling with the issue, the *New York Times* can publish yet another article about whether modern dance is the domain of

men?—an article full of the same selectivity, distortions, and misguided conclusions that we are working to eliminate. It's a tar baby.

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In 2002, I made a solo show called *Vision Begins* because I was perplexed by the legacy of '60s feminism and my place in it. I was acutely aware of having been born on the edge of a revolution, having grown up on an ideological frontier and believing "now women can do anything". And I was dismayed to learn that the world I inherited didn't quite match my expectations. I was both deeply grateful and deeply disillusioned. In one section of the piece, I express my mixed feelings to Betty Friedan: "We aren't housewives any more, Betty. But we don't have them either. Thanks though."

In some sense, the piece grew out of a personal struggle about how to live my life-- the struggle between needing to keep fighting and needing to stop fighting. How can we stop fighting when there is so much left to fight for (the jobs, the equal pay, the respect)? Yet how can we keep fighting when it rules our lives, when the terms of our actions are defined by the reprehensible actions of others, when there is no longer room or energy left to set our own examples?

How *should* we explore gender and equality? I am torn between cutting pantyhose off myself and writing letters to the *New York Times*. Sure, we need to do it all. But life is short; perhaps we can't do both. I have a nascent sense that the deepest change is made by being what we are in the fullest, most perceptive ways possible. As an artist, I need to explore what feels alive and real and will genuinely affect others, even if only briefly or indirectly. As a consultant, I need to be aware of the unproductive patterns of my female clients and raise important questions for them. As a teacher, I need to work hard to train and support my female students. And as a citizen, I need to speak up when I see injustice.

In other words, we need to push on the doors that start to give. And we need to create change *in* our lives, not outside of them.

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