

Ramsay Burt, 'Transatlantic Comparisons' in *Ungoverning Dance: Contemporary European Theatre Dance and the Commons*

Summary prepared by Joanna Lee

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In this Chapter, Professor Burt inquires into new forms of critique in contemporary dance in the 21st Century. He juxtaposes two pairs of choreographers and their dance pieces, namely Jérôme Bel's (1995) piece *Jérôme Bel* and John Jasperse's (2000) piece *Fort Blossom*; and Xavier Le Roy's (2007) solo *Le Sacre du printemps* paired with Trisha Brown's (2002) production of *Winterreise*. Each pair is a juxtaposition of a European and an American choreographer, and dance creation that has been theoretically-informed vs that of somatically-informed.

Before delving into the analyses of the dance works, Burt pointed out that these works 'owe debts to discoveries that were made by members of Judson Dance Theater in the 1960s and 1970s' in the sense that 'both of the US pieces draw on these new bodily focused approaches to creating dance movement, whereas there is little or no explicit evidence of this kind of focus in either of the two European works. Bel and Le Roy, however, use avant-garde approaches to choreography and a radical opening up of the idea of what dance might be, strategies that were pioneered by members of Judson Dance Theater.'

Having explained the works' indebtedness to Judson, Burt reminds us that we should be mindful of the backdrop of 21st Century dance-making, as he refers to the writing on neoliberalism by David Harvey and 'the new spirit of capitalism' Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello. Burt further points out that 'work in post-industrial businesses has shifted, since the 1980s, from the production of material artefacts to the exploitation of immaterial and affective labour.' He proposes that 'Bel's and Le Roy's pieces are... informed by critiques of the social and political context of neoliberalism. It is difficult, however, to see any comparable critical potential in either Brown or in Jasperse's piece.'

Burt gives an account of the development of dance in the U.S. between 1970 and 1999 by referencing to the publications by two dance scholars, Susan Foster and André Lepecki. Foster criticises that in the 1970s and 1980s, instead of supporting artists directly, funding bodies increasingly began to give grants to presenters and organizations... The new approach to funding is an example where neoliberal ideology requires the creation of a market regardless of whether it is appropriate or not. She further points out that choreographers were not able to employ dancers for long enough to develop an individual movement style. In Foster's view, this results in performance that 'homogenizes all styles and vocabularies beneath a sleek, impenetrable surface.'¹

In the meantime, 'a different kind of market for contemporary dance performance developed at about the same time in Europe, particularly in France, Germany, Belgium, and, after the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, in post-Communist countries in the Balkans,' Burt proposes. Impacted by the management-dominated market for dance performance in the U.S., 'radical work that had the potential to promote critical awareness of social issues and to question relations of power was, in her opinion, disappearing. Dancers producing this kind of radical, critical ungoverning work were, however, able to find support within the funding system for dance in European countries, and this is

¹ Susan Leigh Foster, *Dances That Describe Themselves: The Improvised Choreography of Richard Bull* (Middletown, Conn.: Western University Press, 2002), 255.

one of the main reasons for the divergence of contemporary dance between Europe and the United States.’

Burt hereon puts forward his analyses of the four dance pieces mentioned in the 1st paragraph of this summary as he regards them ‘reveal(ing) the different ways in which European and American choreographers approach questions about the body.’ Burt’s anchor of analysis is the handling of nakedness on the works. ‘Bel asked himself what the degree zero of dancing in a theatre might be and decided that it requires three elements: bodies, light, and music. Where bodies are concerned, nakedness is degree zero of a dancer on stage,’ while the duet in *Fort Blossom* ‘is presented in an anonymous and de-individuated way, an exploration of new potentials for bodies in motion. Underlying this, however, is a half hint at erotic sensations, and an intimacy of touch that, performed by two naked men, points towards homosexual practices without actually showing or representing this.’ Burt argues that ‘each dance piece in its own way addresses the social meanings of nakedness... The production values of Jasperse’s piece—its set, costume, lighting, electronic music—contrasts with the ironic asceticism of Bel’s deliberately minimal use of theatrical resources. *Jérôme Bel*’s asceticism, together with its ironic references to Christian Dior stockings, hints at distaste with material consumption... *Fort Blossom* does not suggest the kind of critical unease about neoliberalism that I have argued informs *Jérôme Bel*. This is a key difference between European and US contemporary dance as it has developed since the mid-1990s.’

Le Sacre du printemps and *Winterreise* both interrogate the relation between dance and music, and the body as dance material. Burt suggests that Trisha Brown ‘used dance material in a sparing way, hardly ever letting it take centre stage but only using it to support the singing in a kind of abstracted moving accompaniment’ while Le Roy ‘proposes rethinking the relationship between the performance of music and the movements of musicians as performers. He proposes that what the conductor is doing is dance.’ But it is important to be alert to the fact that ‘Le Roy asked a professional conductor to teach him some rudiments, and after two weeks of instruction began on his own to work out how to beat the notoriously complicated and difficult beats of Stravinsky’s score.’ This self-taught process is, to Burt, conceptually-charged and what sets Le Roy’s piece apart from that of Brown’s. ‘Le Roy, however, deconstructs the idea of the performing artist as a provider of specialized services, proposing to spectators that they can become active participants sharing equal access to what Charlotte Hess and Nancy Ostrom have called a “knowledge commons”’.

Burt summarises his insights into the juxtaposition of European and U.S. dance works. ‘Artists who work with somatically informed approaches to movement research tend to focus on ways of finding new kinds of movement material, often using improvisation. The question for them is not “how is contemporary dance possible” but how is it possible to find new ways of moving... But for the Europeans the question was how to frame dance so that it could be meaningful within the social and political context of the time... There is an asceticism in the appreciation of the ordinary and everyday that can be read as resistance to aspects of neoliberal consumerism.’