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"Much more than movement"

Sewing: the sensuality of natural growth in dance

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1. Abstract

Sensuality is a term that can be misunderstood in discussions about dance and yet other art forms are often freely described as having sensual qualities. These are qualities that can make a work evocative and motivational and are very significant because of that. As the significance of dance varies from culture to culture and from person to person, it could be assumed that the same applies to sensuality. However, perhaps sensuality transcends cultural considerations and personal attitudes. This account of a work in progress looks at one aspect of sensuality: natural growth. An aspect that can be described poetically, qualified numerically and documented formally as it is in this report. Natural growth can be inherent to dance given the right set of conditions because it is a living art and this could be a quality that might not be shared by other arts.

2. Introduction

Dance is more than the movements of a body through space and in time and artists have rendered dance in a variety of formats and mediums. Henri Matisse's is one of those artists and commented that when working on the painting *Dance(1)* that the dance was in him. [1] Xavier Girard has included this painting in his book about the sensuality of colour in the artwork of Matisse and this is a useful starting point for a discussion of sensuality and its relationship to a concept of natural growth. Matisse was not painting what he saw as much as what he felt and the vibrant and contrasting colours and the extended figures of the dancers are elements used by Matisse to demonstrate the dance that was in him. Near the end of his life Matisse declared the observation that to infuse an art work with what he described as the same ability to thrill as nature does; requires a devotion by the artist that was capable of inspiring and sustaining the patient striving towards truth and analytical profundity. [2]

Sensuality could be described as an experience of pleasurable and enjoyable activity that is both personal and public. Sensuality is both an intellectual activity and a physical experience and because of that, dance is the most accessible art form for its expression. There is a photograph of Matisse in Girard's book that shows the artist barefooted and seated in a wheelchair cutting out paper shapes for one of his works. [3] The artist is totally absorbed in the task and the floor around him is covered with a profusion of paper shapes and others can be seen on the walls. There is a sense of unity. The artist is complimented by the work he is producing and the assemblage on the wall can be understood to be original

and a progression from the activity of the artist. There is a recognizable provenance for every component presented in the photograph. That provenance becomes evidence of originality and the sustainability of patient progress toward a goal of the natural growth of an artistic product. Matisse is concentrating on nothing else than transforming sheets of paper into a work of art and it is that concentration that brings a quality of sensuality to the scene in the photograph.

If that same level of concentration is applied to dance a suitable environment is made for natural growth. Concentration allows the achievement of a position of balance or an act of flexibility or strength, for example a plié in ballet, a toe stand in Irish dance, a leap in jazz dance, a spring in Scottish dance or any other dance movement that can be named. The application of thought to movement facilitates the achievement of an advanced movement. This is natural growth and for the dancer it is a sensuous experience, however, an audience might not understand that. Therefore, sensuality for the audience could be influenced by culture.

Education influences culture but not always in a way that can be seen as natural growth. John Armstrong points out that education may increase attendance to institutions for culture but it does not guarantee an interest in or liking for what is seen nor does education nurture a devotion to the processes of art. [4] However, devotion without education can be oppressive to natural growth causing sensuality to be considered as an esoteric quality. Devotion needs to be a voluntary act to be sustainable and therefore the processes of art are voluntary as well. The dancer can seek sensuality within the framework of natural growth and therefore if there is a temporary lapse of devotion, concentration can restore that.

Concentration is an acquired skill that can be easily lost without practice. The acquisition of concentration is incremental and vulnerable to many influences. When these influences cannot be eliminated the vulnerability should be if the sensuality of natural growth is the desired result. *Sewing* is a work in progress that sets out to eliminate vulnerability and restore a sense of abundance. It is hoped that the work can be seen as representing the sensuality of natural growth and appreciated for its truth and analytical profundity.

3. Defining work in progress

If sensuality has a relationship to natural growth then the equation of this combination could be identifiable. This is not a discussion about dance for provocation and multiplication; it is a description of work for dance with a common denominator: the elimination of vulnerability for abundance being a stable situation for sensitive considerations such as issues of faith, culture and personal knowledge. In a brief discussion about living in a multi-faith and multicultural society such as Australia, Professor Terry Lovat describes some of the riches that can be gathered through dialogue and brings attention to the quality of tolerance through learning [5]. This is one way of acquiring a sense of abundance and is just as suitable for dance as it is for any other human endeavour. However, dance brings a bonus in that an individual can gain confidence in his

or her own abilities through performance and with that confidence comes the courage to be tolerant.

Dialogue for dance can be learnt with guided study and this acts as a conduit for sensitivity. If stability is a desired state for peaceful negotiation that stems from sensitivity, then any activity that acknowledges that encourages confidence in the future. That activity will be the common denominator for the sensuality of natural growth and a stabilizer for acquisitions and negotiations. But if this equation is to work, then the common denominator in this case must be defined. For this approach to dance, *Sewing* as a solo dance is the common denominator and its definition as a work in progress allows for learning and reflection and can be guided by the goal of performance for the provision of resources for the future. This provision will eliminate vulnerability and allow for a sense of abundance. Confidence is made a component of study and tolerance a prerequisite for the continued gathering of personal knowledge.

4. The challenge of confidence and the reward of tolerance

The premise of this discussion is the challenge to describe a concept that is much more than movement. This is a challenge in the broadest sense that is being met with the paradigm of work in progress for a solo dance and is an activity requiring a degree of courage. This paradigm should not be seen as the oeuvre of an individual or group but it can be used as an example of a contextual dance for a sedentary audience. If the context of this dance were a multi-faith and multicultural society, then dialogue would be useful for a beginning. However, because this work is a single expression of faith and culture linked to technical considerations; it will be those technical considerations that influence the character of the presentation of the dance leaving dialogue as comment for a later stage. The passive nature of dance makes this order of events acceptable and useful for dancers working in isolated areas and encourages originality.

If issues of faith and culture divide some regions of the world and unite others, then faith and culture are changeable and could be volatile. Regardless of division or unity; unpolluted water, nutritional food, clean air, accessible education and health care are real concerns for worldwide habitation and humanity. Activities that acknowledge these concerns have a common ground and can be related by the reality of useful progress. If *Sewing* emerges from this common ground with technical consideration based on reflection; then its character will demonstrate the influence of these reflective considerations and issues of faith and culture can remain personal and intact. Tolerance because of confidence becomes a reality and is communicated as methodology. Immunity and assurance are the results of all of this and can be described poetically, qualified numerically and documented formally. This immunity and assurance can be an ethic of process to support the sensuality of natural growth in dance.

In summary; the ethic of process for *Sewing* is immunity and assurance because of the elimination of vulnerability for abundance. This ethic applies to this one work but might be

desirable for other works and provision for transmission can be a facet of methodology. *Sewing* is an independent and personal work that acknowledges sustainable and accessible contributions when possible. Its benchmark for quality is ease and acceptability of presentation at a future World Congress for Dance Research. The underlying philosophy is that dance can contribute to the sensitization of an individual to the nuances of their immediate environment and because of that; pedagogy in the field of dance should encourage the value of acknowledging provenance.

5. The virtue of creative practice as an original paradigm for dance

When considering how to acknowledge provenance, methodology is the object of concentration. The value of this objectivity is the virtue of the creative practice in the formation of this methodology. When that is related to the original context of a dance; that dance becomes an autonomous occurrence because each dance will have a time and a mode of delivery that is specific to it. This occurrence establishes copyright for the dance and highlights the benefits of detailing provenance as a way of abbreviating administration. The description of how, when and why a dance is made and/or performed forms a shield of morality around the paradigm of that dance and that shield can be used as a base of response to critique. It is this base of responsiveness that can be evaluated.

Christine Swanton discusses four bases of moral responsiveness: value, status, benefit and bonds. [6] It is through the bond of creative practice that a dance emerges and value, status and benefit can be included in that practice without compromise. Swanton does discuss the limits of morality and that virtue has contrasts. [7] Perhaps the specification of criteria can justify some contrasts, though the details of provenance and the abbreviation of administration might be obstructed in the process. The provision of criteria for presentation balances and minimizes and becomes a source of cadence for the dance. When the clarity of purpose and expression is propelled by this cadence, obstacles can be negotiated and provenance and administration are definable and part of the presentation. Scottish Youth Dance can illustrate that with *Desperate Journey* [8] and in fact, *Sewing* is the result of discussions by email with Artistic Director, Andy Howitt [9] about the history of one Scottish dance in the context of an Australian celebration of a Scottish tradition for social purposes (Photograph 1.JPG). [10]

It has already been stated that the philosophy connected to the creative practice of *Sewing* is that dance can contribute to the sensitization of an individual to the nuances of their immediate environment. Whether this is a virtue or a stretching of the limits of morality is being acknowledged but not left as an obstruction. The original base of responsiveness for this particular dance; is the continued and overwhelming occupation with best practices for dance in one locality and that concentration of focus is offered as the virtue of this paradigm. *Sewing* illustrates the praxis of one dancer working in the field of artistic practice for dance. The methodology and intent will be personal and as originality is part of the intent, resources have been gathered from new places. These new resources bring freshness to the work but do not change the context. The working environment can be viewed from

the vantage point of these new resources. If these resources are chosen with an understanding of a more universal approach to dance than the locality offers, there is a broadening of perspective that will be tested. But the resources for *Sewing* have been chosen with some personal knowledge of universal themes making experimentation ephemeral or redundant. The virtue of creative practice for originality allows for some degree of capriciousness bringing with it a softening of the rigour of research and technology. This is the sensuality of natural growth and *Sewing* is intended to be a joyous celebration of that.

6. Learning materials as provenance

Lynne Anne Blom and L. Tarin Chaplin comment that:

‘Every artist-choreographer knowingly or unwittingly takes a stand and makes a statement beyond the content of the dance itself. Each work reveals his [her] attitudes toward the state of the art, his [her] viewpoint about the function of art.’ [11]

If *Sewing* is intended to be a joyous celebration of the sensuality of natural growth, then the resources that have been chosen and gathered will support that. These resources are as much a revelation of a personal attitude to dance, as is the dance itself and it is this revelation as methodology that can be scrutinized.

The methodology is based on the actual practice of dance that the artist-choreographer has adopted over many years of involvement with dance. It is based on; a working knowledge of Scottish forms of dance in an Australian context, an interest in Celtic art that has grown from that knowledge, formal studies for visual arts and dance instruction by external studies through tertiary institutions in Australia, and an active participation in the activities of the International Dance Council – CID in the form of contributions for previous congresses. As this dance is attempting to coincide with contemporary attitudes and modern trends for dance, some aspects of the methodology will change overtime to allow for this coincidence. In a way this is something that is characteristic of Celtic art and links this modern dance to a natural heritage that predates formal documentation of any dance associated with Celtic culture. Vincent Megaw and Ruth Megaw write in their book about Celtic art that:

‘The eclecticism of Celtic art is not, however, mere copying, but the sign of a society open to such change as it chose to accept and adapt on its own terms. Though stylistic features were borrowed, the messages transmitted seem to have been affected by internal factors only.’ [12]

This internalizing of information has resulted in artistic works that have formed the base of new works of art in this modern age. For *Sewing*, the knowledge of historic forms of dance can be taken for granted because they are imprinted on the dancer’s memory and appear in some movements. (Photograph 2.JPG) [13] To build on that knowledge is the challenge of *Sewing* and the essence of this understanding of natural growth. The search for modernity

can be an expression of sensuality and dance is a contemporary medium suitable for that search. What might be considered capricious or coincidence in one stage can be seen included as part of a process of modernization at a later date. A vocabulary for a modern dance can be gained by internalizing found knowledge and the coincidence eventually becomes an accepted methodology for the revelation of a personal stand with regard to dance.

7. The actual practice

The stand that this choreographer is taking is that dance is worthy of being considered an everyday activity and in fact, any less of a consideration is an injustice to human development. Blom and Chaplin explain that the choreographer searches relentlessly for the quality of emotional response that signals recognition of the artistic base. [14] The emotional response has a pathway for expression that could be analyzed in the light of Swanton's four bases of moral responsiveness. The artistic base for *Sewing* is multifaceted and has a value, status, benefit and bond. This base in actual practice is a moral response to the immediate environment and, to eliminate vulnerability, the best elements of that environment receive the most attention. *Sewing* should demonstrate the virtues of its provenance and with the use of accents; the sensuality of its natural growth can act as a gauge for similar works. The immediate environment is a personal point of reference and in this case has as its centre; a family home in an area recognized by local and state governments for its natural resources. [15] Gosford District Historical Research Association has documented the area's history [16] and the environs are an attraction for tourists from all countries. (Photograph 3.JPG) [17]

It is from this base of conserved and appreciated nature that a broader appreciation of synergy has been gained. The choreographic structure and artistry for *Sewing* is evolving from that base. Synergy and natural growth are relative and therefore sensuality can be understood to occur as the result of that relationship. H. Gene Blocker describes this as a contextual arrangement of elements that can be understood as being the 'form' of a work of art [18] The learning materials are the elements and the contextual arrangement are the processes of choreography and artistic direction. The presentation of the results of these processes can be described as synergy meaning that each element is influenced by choreography and artistic direction. This functional approach to form can be reversed and form can influence function. This cycle of creativity generates its own virtue and actualizes the dance and it is the artist-choreographer as the performer who is responsible for the cycle. However the dance is presented will be representational of the performer's consciousness of the contextual arrangement and internalizing that arrangement happens during the creative cycle.

8. The cycle of creativity

Dance making is as much a process of methodical analysis as it is of creative improvisation. To find a balance broadens the vocabulary for the dance and can be empowering. There is

always the methodical analysis to bring the dance back into focus and improvisation allows for capriciousness and coincidences to occur. The physical balance becomes the virtue of the dance and this is when the internalizing occurs naturally. If there is a nemesis for dance then it is the lack of faith in the virtue of the choreographic process. Modern dances struggle for recognition, contemporary methodology for dance is impoverished and the research of historic dances is neglected. The creative process can counter this nemesis with a strengthening of the artistic base as the essence of impulsion for choreographic processes and it is this strengthening of the artistic base that is the sensual quality of *Sewing*.

Sewing can be enriched with methodical analysis and creative improvisation and it will not be until the dance is performed that the sense of this will be realized. If the artist-choreographer has confidence in their own ability to strengthen the artistic base then that should be rewarded with faith in the processes that are adopted to achieve that. To state the form and function of *Sewing* is the beginning of that strengthening activity and that has already occurred in this report. The next section outlines how the strengthening will progress and reflection happens automatically because of the concentration that is required to internalize capricious and coincidental occurrences.

9. Vocabulary and methodology

There are two parts to *Sewing*, this report with preceding and subsequent written presentations and the active demonstration of an acquired knowledge of dance in the form of daily practice. It is this regularity of practice that will function as the conduit for the information and activity that is required to strengthen the artistic base. The vernacular will form the vocabulary and the routine will shape the methodology.

Dance is both a verb and a noun and is defined in the dictionary compiled by editorial staff from Macquarie University [19] as being rhythmical movements of the body especially to music. This definition is not applicable to all dances but it is applicable to *Sewing*. Therefore, it will be this dictionary and its accompanying thesaurus [20] that will shape and refine the movement vocabulary.

Working with family and friends in a rural area (as is the case with this dance) has its advantages. There is always the opportunity for informal talks that can result in a new approach to a movement and resourcefulness becomes a priority and inherent. Currently the dance is practiced in a nearby hall made available with cooperative efforts of local residents and group leaders. (Photograph 4.JPG) [21] When watching a video sample of Andy Howitt's choreography for *Rural Image* [22] it was evident that a dancer's fitness has an influence on aesthetic quality. To improve personal fitness has far reaching benefits and the place to begin is with a healthy and sensible approach to diet. The CSIRO Total Wellbeing Diet by Dr. Manny Noakes with Dr. Peter Clifton [23] has proved to be a practical guide to nutrition and useful for a more diligent approach to the concept of wellness for dance. This is the baseline for the dance and will influence its eventual appearance.

Andy Howitt's choreography is dynamic and robust and illustrates a working knowledge

of kinesiology and although the choreography for *Sewing* is different, a similar understanding of the mechanics of motion will animate the dance for performance. Kenneth Laws states:

‘Only when the movements called for by the choreographer work within the constraints of physical reality and of the technical capabilities of the dancers can the dancers apply their interpretive skills in order to dance...’ [24]

The choreographer as the dancer has an intimate understanding of his or her own body and dance skills. There is no requirement to form a bridge with movements just to facilitate a whim of the choreographer or an idiosyncrasy of the dancer and interpretative skills can be maximized. It is in this process that many lessons are learnt and this is how the value of the sensuality of natural growth can be assessed

10. The preliminary assessment

The criterion for assessment is confidence because as stated earlier, with confidence comes the courage to be tolerant. The reference point for this assessment is an invitation from Phillip Rutherford [25], to choreograph for and dance at a local concert that featured music from around the world played by Gosford City Brass Band. Since that event, confidence as a choreographer and solo performer has been strengthened along with personal fitness. The concert proved that an international view of music and dance had a place in the culture of the city and that a dance formed in a rural environment could contribute to that culture in a sensitive production. One feature of this concert was a slideshow of photographs from the personal collections of band members who had visited other countries or travelled around Australia. This personal account created an appropriate ambiance for the event and helped to strengthen the confidence of the dancer. This same approach is being applied to *Sewing* and is proving to be the best way to maintain the confidence of the dancer/choreographer for the continuation of this work.

Footnotes

1. Xavier Girard, p.61
'...I am particularly fond of the dance and can see more through dance: expressive movement, music that I like. That dance was in me.'
2. Xavier Girard, p. 111
'Art may be said to imitate nature...by the life that the creative worker infuses into the work of art. ...Great love is needed to achieve this effect, a love capable of inspiring and sustaining that patient striving towards truth, that glowing warmth, and that analytic profundity that accompany the birth of any work of art.'
3. Xavier Girard, p. 110
4. John Armstrong, p. 99
5. Terry Lovat: What can we learn in a multi-faith society. Aurora, issue 44, February – March 2004. Available at:
http://www.mn.catholic.org.au/newsroom/auroraissues/aurora44_p7story.htm
[Accessed: 18 July 2005]
6. Christine Swanton, p. 23
7. Christine Swanton, p. 25
8. YDance (Scottish Youth Dance) is the National Youth Dance Agency for Scotland.
Available at: <http://www.ydance.org> [Accessed: 29 July, 2005]
9. Andrew Howitt, Artistic Director
'Andy was born in Fife, and danced with Fife Youth Dance Company before going to Laban Centre for Movement and Dance in London, Andy then joined Transitions Dance Company, also based at Laban.

Since leaving college Andy has danced and performed with Diversions Dance Company, Scottish Opera, TAG Theatre Company and Scottish Dance Theatre.

In 1999 Andy became Artistic Director for Scottish Youth Dance. Andy has also appeared on TV as the mystery guest on They Think It's All Over! and with Tam Cowan on Offside dancing the Archie Gemmill Goal.'
Available at: <http://www.ydance.org/ydancepeople.html> [Accessed: 29 July 2005]
10. Photograph 1.JPG: 18 June 2005 of dancing group at the monthly ceilidh (pronounced

‘kaylee’) – a social gathering of music and dance of the Gosford Caledonian Club.

11. Lynne Anne Blom and L. Tarin Chaplin, p.14

12. Vincent Megaw, and Ruth Megaw, p. 21

13. Photographs 2.JPG: The dancer and a young student of dance in 1989.

14. Lynne Anne Blom and L. Tarin Chaplin, p.14

‘As a work of art, the dance is as specific as it is universal; it points from the known to the unknown or deepens that which is already understood.’

15. Gosford City Council brochure about the Erina Creek catchment prepared as part of a NSW Government initiative.

16. Gosford Model Farms 1885: a review, Gosford, NSW, Australia, Gosford District Research Association, 1981.

17. Photograph 3.JPG: Teaching and learning dance at a local beach with Rowan Chestnut 2005.

18. H. Gene Blocker, p. 145

19. A. Delbridge, (editor-in-chief): The Macquarie Dictionary, McMahons Point, NSW, Australia, Macquarie Library Pty. Ltd., 1981, p. 470

20. J.R.L. Bernard, (General editor): The Macquarie Thesaurus, Macquarie University, NSW, Australia, The Macquarie Library Pty. Ltd., 1986.

21. Photograph 4.JPG: 1st Erina Heights Scout Hall, contact Mr David Williamson

22. Video clip of dance for *Rural Image* available at:

<http://www.dougiemaclean.com/rural%20image/rural.htm>[Accessed 10 August 2005]

23. Manny Noakes and Peter Clifton, p. viii

‘CSIRO is Australia’s national science agency and one of the world’s largest and diverse scientific research organizations.’

24. Kenneth Laws, p. 10

25. Phillip Rutherford is the Musical Director for Gosford City Brass Band, the Australian National C Grade Champions 2005, available at: <http://>

gosfordcitybrassband.tripod.com/index.html [Accessed 13 August 2005]

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