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THE POLITICS AND POETICS OF CHOREOGRAPHY:
THE DANCING BODY
IN SOUTH AFRICAN DANCE

THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of
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UNDERTAKING

I hereby declare that this thesis is entirely my own work and has not been submitted previously as a dissertation for any degree in any other university.

..... 15 January 1996

ABSTRACT

THE POLITICS AND POETICS OF CHOREOGRAPHY: THE DANCING
BODY IN SOUTH AFRICAN DANCE

This mini-thesis is situated in the discourse on patriarchy, nationhood and its artistic forms. It is argued that an uncritical pursuit of commonality as a political aesthetic strategy for dance in South Africa repeats the metaphysical foundationalism of this discourse. It is further suggested that a postmodern ethos subverts this heritage, while at the same time offering a viable alternative for accommodating and representing the cultural diversity and plurality characteristic of current theatre dance in South Africa.

Chapter One examines the way dance has historically structured its discourses and practice through patriarchal form. Chapter Two explores the potential of the postmodern as a site of deconstruction and destabilisation of this dance heritage. This chapter also assesses the relevance of a postmodern alternative in a South African dance context. Chapter Three analyses the postmodern choreographic strategies of two South African choreographers, Gary Gordon and Robyn Orlin, in order to reveal how their dance aesthetic offers an alternative vision to patriarchal form and uncritical notions of commonality. In conclusion, it is argued that the postmodern ethos embodied in the work of these choreographers provides viable directions for formulating and articulating new dance directions for theatre dance in South Africa while, at the same time, bearing witness to the diversity that will always structure expressions of commonality in South African dance.

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It was simply a struggle for fresh air, in which, if the windows could not be opened, there was danger that panes would be broken, though painted with images of saints and martyrs. Light, coloured by these reverend effigies, was none the more respirable for being picturesque.

J.R.Lowell

(in *Painted Windows* by A Gentleman With A Duster)

INTRODUCTION

Although Western theatre dance is generally regarded as being the art of the body, it seems that mainstream dance has often colluded with a denial of the body. As a metaphysics of the body, Western theatre dance has concurrently birthed a stereotypical, *ideal* dancing body that it has nourished and projected as normative and prime. In his book, *The Male Dancer: Bodies, Spectacle and Sexualities* (1995), Burt Ramsay addresses the ways in which some choreographers have succeeded in making visible aspects of bodiness which are denied or "rendered invisible" within mainstream work.

The first chapter of this thesis, *One History/One Body*, will investigate some of the theoretical and artistic traditions that have structured this *invisibility* in an attempt to explore and disclose the insidious neutrality and universality that is its guise. This will require a close examination of the dialogue between informal representations of the social body and the more formal representations of the dancing body in order to reveal the ways in which representations of gendered bodies present themselves in dance.

The second chapter, *Body Politics In Postmodern Discourses*, will identify and analyse strategies that allow the radical artist potential sites at which to deconstruct this *ideal* dancing body. This chapter is divided into two sections. The first part, entitled *The Return of the Repressed*, will assess the artistic strategies of postmodern projects: postmodern discourses have attempted to interrogate the foundational structures of patriarchal representations, and the thesis will examine the body politics contained in the techniques and methods of postmodern discourses. The second part of this

chapter, entitled *Postmodern Dance in South Africa*, will then assess the relevance and potential of such postmodern strategies in a South African dance context. This will necessarily require a discussion and evaluation of the current dance discourse in South Africa.

The third chapter, *Unhomely Houses*, will consider the ways in which dance companies and choreographers in South Africa have attempted to mobilise the dancing body in order to demystify and deconstruct these previous *official* representations of the dancing body. The thesis will analyse works by two South African choreographers in order to explore their artistic manifestos and locate their dance aesthetic within the broader theatre dance context. The selected works include: *The Unspeakable Story* (1995) choreographed by Gary Gordon and performed by The First Physical Theatre Company and *In a corner the sky surrenders* (1995) choreographed and performed by Robyn Orlin. While space does not permit exhaustive analysis of the works, the arguments presented will attempt to reveal the potential of postmodern choreographic strategies for formulating and articulating new dance directions in South Africa.

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH PROCEDURES

The conceptual framework which has informed this mini-thesis has been influenced by postmodern approaches that seek to re-search/re-present traditional epistemological and methodological discourses. In this regard, a critical reading of postmodern, French feminist and post-structuralist theorists as well as a reading and critical interpretation of the writings of both international and local dance theorists was undertaken. The research has also drawn from different perspectives including those offered by sociology, anthropology and philosophy.

The methodology and research procedures utilise perspectives offered by dance theorists whose research procedures are, amongst other things, concerned with the re-evaluation of knowledge qua source of knowledge. The value of acknowledging experientially derived interpretations of meaning as legitimate sources of knowledge, enables one to take the body seriously at a conceptual level. Given that dance is directly concerned with representations of the body, these vistas of knowledge empower dance to challenge its social as well as discursive marginality.

A critical interpretation of extensive interviews conducted with the choreographers in question, Robyn Orlin and Gary Gordon, has provided crucial primary source material for the analysis of their works. These interpretations have been enriched by interviews conducted with the choreographers' artistic collaborators. Further primary sources include newspaper and journal reviews of dance by a variety of dance critics; attendance at rehearsals and performances of the works discussed; programme notes and video recordings of performance examples.

Dance scholarship has historically been a marginalised and neglected area of cultural and theatre studies in South Africa. The consequences of this lack of research has been minimal writings and documented resources on South Africa's varied and extensive dance history.

My hope is that this mini-thesis will contribute to extending and promoting original dance research on South African dance and expand dance scholarship. This would aid the documentation and interpretation of current trends and developments in order to provide resource material for the study of dance history. The proposed combined arts programme to be implemented within secondary and tertiary educational curriculae lends urgency to the need for dance texts that can be utilised in teacher training courses. The research also seeks to serve the dance community by opening up an arena of debate: a two - way process of information and communication between dance practice and dance scholarship. Preliminary research endeavors to contribute to the debate on dance criticism and the politics of the body.

CHAPTER I

ONE HISTORY/ONE BODY; OR, BETWEEN FEAR AND DESIRE

Western bourgeois morality seems to lie uncomfortably somewhere between fear and desire. The following quotation from Jeanette Winterson's novel, *Sexing The Cherry*, captures this discomfort. The words are spoken by her central protagonist, an *indecently* buxom and outspoken woman:

I've seen puritans going past a theatre where all was merriment and pleasure and holding their starched linen to their noses for fear they might smell pleasure and be infected by it.

(Winterson; 1990 26)

The hostile reactions and suspicion that dance has illicit over the centuries bears poignant witness to the body denied and reveals the complex contradictions that connect pleasure/desire with the dis-eased body. The purity ethic that accompanies this denial of the body is strongly rooted in both the ethical and religious foundations of Western thought. In an article, *Philosophy and the Dance*, David Michael Levin poses the following question:

What could be the connection between patriarchal aversion to the female principle and our cultural rejection of the body? (Levin; 1983 88)

French feminist theorist and theatre playwright, Hélène Cixous, provides a valuable starting point to understanding the genealogy of this question in her book, *The Laugh of the Medusa*:

Thought has always worked by opposition ... And all the couples of oppositions are couples. Does this mean something? Is the fact that logocentrism subjects all thought - all the concepts, codes, the values - to a two-term system, related to the couple man-woman. (Cixous; 1975 91)

Cixous' claim that Western metaphysics is structured in terms of this central binary opposition thus provides a crucial link for conceptualising patriarchy's hostility to the female principle. These binary oppositions are always placed in a hierarchical relationship where the first term is seen as positive, normative or prime and the second term as negative, deviant or subordinate. A listing of these dichotomies becomes infinite: mind/body, culture/nature, truth/fiction, theory/experience, conscious/unconscious, white/black, objective/subjective, self/other, Apollo/Dionysus, sameness /difference ...

These institutionalised structures of a hierarchical, oppositional sexual order have also been expressed and realised in artistic production. Within this logocentric rationale, science and art reflect the binarism of the Cartesian split between the mind and the body.

"In the beginning was the word" and this word was verbal according to the Graeco-Judeo-Christian tradition. The word of science, and its attendant obsession with classification, objectivity and truth, has provided the paradigm for the rational and the knowable. The arts, and particularly dance (engaging with the non-verbal) thus became marginalised - knowledge was seen to be produced by the order and logic of the rational mind in language. As Camille Paglia suggests, employing the familiar Apollo/Dionysian duality, Western science is a product of the linear Apollonian mind, with its "naming", its "cold light of intellect" (Paglia; 1991 5). Artistic production, on the other hand, is associated with the Dionysian principle of ecstasy, fluidity, emotion and body. Order versus energy. Control versus anarchy. Reason versus emotion. Paglia, in her characteristically flamboyant and sensationalist style, thus provocatively begins her book, *Sexual Personae*, with the following words:

In the beginning was *Nature*. (Paglia; 1990 1)

The religious foundations of Western civilization are seeped in this binary logic. Levin analyses one of the primary symbols of Christianity: the cross. He argues that this symbol powerfully represents the crucifixion of the body:

It is not enough that the body is visibly emaciated and starved (in accordance with the patriarchal ideal of self-mastery) ... but the resurrected body exists in Heaven, not on earth. (Levin; 1983 87)

These icons and rituals repeat a division of the sacred and the secular. This symbol of the body crucified easily transfers onto women, who are seen to represent the body, nature and hence sexuality. Both women and body become removed from the ideal or spiritual: both become associated with what is perceived as a *lower*, subordinate physical function that has to be transcended in pursuit of the sacred, the pure. The body becomes a subversive swamp that recalls the origins of sin and mankind's first shame. The punishment is heaped onto the tarnished and tainted female body and henceforth, it is regarded with suspicion in its association with pleasures that tempt. As Camille Paglia argues, menstruation was called the "curse" because of its reference to the expulsion from Eden caused by Eve's seduction and for which she was condemned to suffer labour pains in childbirth. The blood is the "stain", the birthmark. Paglia develops her argument by suggesting that procreative woman is the most troublesome obstacle to Christianity's claim to Catholicity - testified by its "wishful doctrines of Immaculate Conception and virgin birth" (Paglia 1991 28).

In the Bible, the *word* of God expounds this purity ethic:

When a woman has a discharge of blood which is her regular discharge from her body, she shall be in impurity for seven days and whoever touches her shall be *unclean* until the evening.

(Leviticus 15:19; emphasis mine)

Unclean, cursed, the body/woman is disgraced and must be covered (the fig leaves; clothing; the Arabic purdah; veiling). Furthermore, since man is made in God's image and since Eve is made from a part of Adam (the rib), suggestions of *unwholeness* already permeate her body. If this *temple* is to be morally pure and sound, it needs to be whole and so Eve is already anatomically disadvantaged.

This disadvantage can perhaps be seen to shift onto those with anatomical disfigurement - they, too, become incomplete, unsound, unstable. The attitudes displayed historically towards the disfigured and disabled (other-abled) confirms and reinforces this purity ethic (1). The attempts of science and medicine to manage and control sexuality and pathology have supported and sustained the logic of this phallocentric aversion to the "other" which is equated with the feminine principle. Foucault, for example, notes that for a long time, hermaphrodites were regarded as criminals:

Hermaphrodites were crime's offspring, since their anatomical disposition, their very being, confounded the law that distinguishes the sexes and prescribed their union. (Rabinow; 1984 318)

These myths have filtered through the ages and still inform our fears and prejudices about sexuality labelled deviant. In dance, the figure of Salome as the wanton woman, has recurred and has often provoked hostile reaction from members of the public. Judith Lynne Hanna

1. Examples include: In Britain, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the disfigured were paraded in circuses as "freaks", cursed by nature and God. Leprosy was seen to be a curse and its victims unclean - in fact, research has indicated that leprosy was, incorrectly, seen to have originated from African women through sexually transmitted diseases (Gilman; 1986 225). In the 20th century, AIDS is the "curse" for sexual deviancy in the eyes of public morality and AIDS sufferers have militantly opposed the emotional and social quarantine that bourgeois morality (in the voice of the Church and the state) has imposed on this disease.

cites the performance of *Salome* by Maud Allen in 1917 as an example. Her performance caused a riot, and British MP, Noel Pemberton Billing went as far as accusing Allen of being a sadist and a lesbian in an article entitled: *The Cult Of The Clitoris* which he published in his private journal, *The Vigilante* (Hanna; 1988 183). The name of his paper certainly suggests that he was concerned, with true paternalistic foreboding, to protect public morality. Elaine Showalter, in her book, *Sexual Anarchy*, cites this same incident. She notes that, in her attempt to sue the paper for libel in 1918, the fact that Maud Allan recognised the term clitoris, was used by the defense to prove her *degeneracy*. Pemberton-Billing, in his defense, proclaimed:

Clitoris is an anatomical term ... a Greek word; understood of the few. I had never heard it in my life before, and I doubt any member of the Jury had ever heard of it in his life before. The word was calculated to be understood only of those people who in their ordinary common parlance would refer to these things. (Showalter; 1991 162)

Allen lost the case.

The examples cited above reveal the extent to which this phallo-logocentric logic has monopolised Western thinking, and how it has reproduced an imperialist and patriarchal ideology that has found expression as the dominant discourse. Western culture thus becomes projected as a universal norm. Or, in the words of Jacques Derrida:

Metaphysics - the white mythology which reassembles and reflects the culture of the West; the white man takes his own mythology, his own logos, that is the mythos of his idiom, for the universal form of that he must still wish to call reason.

(Derrida; 1982 213)

This metaphysical discourse can be understood in terms of a Foucauldian analysis, as strategies of power and subjection, inclusion and exclusion, the voiced and the

silenced. Within these structures then, the female principle, as *other*, becomes projected as deviant and derivative: woman is black, madness, nature, homosexual, emotion, swamp, darkness.

In their feminist analysis of methodologies, Stanley and Wise (1993) point out that the slogan "Knowledge Is Power" has quite rightly been the watchword of radical social movements since the 18th century: for knowledge production is a crucial foundation of any apparatus of power, including within feminism (Wise; 1993 192). It is at this structural level that feminist politics has taken issue with the exclusion of women as agents of knowledge - that women have been the objects, rather than subjects, in the processes of history and knowledge production. Recent feminist debates, using the combined strategies of postmodern and post-structuralist theories and research methodologies have attempted to contest and disturb patriarchal ideologies and discourses by inserting a feminist ethic, epistemology and methodology into writing. Hence, French feminists have coined their own neologism - "gynesis" - which means, the putting into discourse of "woman" (Eagleton; 1991 9). This textual politics is an attempt at a "*l'écriture féminine*" - writing the feminine - in order to deconstruct patriarchal language and what it inscribes about women.

One of the sacrosanct areas that feminist theory has attacked is this logocentric rationality which generates essentialist gender polarities. Rather, feminist theories focus on what Wise calls, the necessity of "taking the body seriously" at a conceptual level. In rejecting Classical, essentialist conceptualisations of the body as a biologically determined and constituted organism which has "real essentially derived differences in terms of sex" (Wise; 1993 196), post-structuralist feminist theories assert that the body be seen in terms of *embodiment*:

A cultural process by which the physical body becomes a site of culturally ascribed and disputed meanings, experiences, feelings. Here 'the body' is positioned within culturally specific discourses of meaning, authority and control .. 'the body' is thus both signified - the product of language and a set of institutions that define, classify, assign, order and control; and also one of the key signifiers in Western culture .. *'the body' is actually different bodies.* (Stanley and Wise; 1993 197 - emphasis mine)

The traditional notion of the body as a fixed entity containing a single essence or truth is thus exploded and with it, the idea that there is a typical, essential male/female body. Given that dance is directly concerned with representations of the body, the contribution that a historical analysis of the dancing body can make to reformulating paradigms of knowledge is vital. As Dempster (Brown; 1983 211) suggests, such an analysis can generate a "political history of corporeality". These perspectives thus provide a vital terrain through which dance can challenge both its own, and the body's marginality.

The official versions of *History* are marked by an imperialist and patriarchal discourse which asserts its mastery in its claims to absolute truth, meaning, objectivity. Dance history follows suite. A feminist historiography of the dancing body has the potential to disrupt the traditional chronology of dance history. As Brown argues, an analysis of dominant representations of the dancing body reveal the way gender stereotypes are "naturalized" within specific periods/genres of dance and how systems of power condone representations of certain types of female/male bodies while suppressing others (Brown; 1983 199).

Brown illustrates this point when she argues that there never was a cultural renaissance for women during the 15th and 16th centuries in Europe. Placing her analysis in the dance history we have inherited, she argues that

the court ballets are generally regarded as foundational to the development of theatre dance in the West:

Formalized through a succession of royal benefactors, the surviving treatises and notation scores of ... early ballets were authorized by men, who also occupied the role of ballet master and choreographer within the court. Though some women participated as dancers, male dominance prevailed within the hierarchical ordering of these spectacles. (Brown; 1983 201)

Brown's point is that to consider the role of women in the court ballets is therefore to expose their *lack* of power. The idea that our dance heritage is a patriarchally constructed vision has been highlighted by Adair (1992) and obliquely by Copeland (1990). As Brown points out, while Copeland's analysis focuses on the preeminence of women in modern and postmodern dance, it can be legitimately argued that for women, their renaissance originated with the "celebratory lyricism of the barefooted and uncorseted dancer at the turn of the century" (Brown; 1983 201).

A feminist reading of women's high profile in Western theatre dance reveals a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the obvious presence of women in dance fits very neatly into phallo-logocentric discourses - both are *body*. In this way, a patriarchal logic is reinforced. On the other edge, dance becomes a contested terrain, with women challenging the male dominated arena of cultural representation. Roger Copeland's analysis in *Founding Mothers* (1990) elucidates critical insights into the visions and methods that reproduce the "male economy" or male gaze that appropriates women's sexualities and bodies in cultural representations. Drawing on French feminist theory, he argues that a "deep, abiding connection" can be assumed between patriarchal culture and a tendency to privilege the visual over the tactile. He points out that analytical detachment has been a "prerogative of patriarchy" (Copeland; 1990 8) - the

visual being connected to the rational, male *mind* and the tactile to the irrational, emotional female *body*. Camille Paglia, in her provocative account of the traditions in Western Art, echoes this view:

The Western eye is a projectile into the beyond, the wilderness of the male condition. Phallic aggression and projection are intrinsic to Western conceptualisation. Arrow, eye, gun, cinema: the blazing lightbeam of the movie projector is our modern path of Apollonian transcendence ... every pictorial framing is a ritual limitation, a barred precinct. (Paglia; 1990 31)

Within this visual "wilderness", tactile and kinetic impulses (the non-verbal) are targeted as spilling over and beyond this "precinct". Luce Irigaray extends these insights in her post-structuralist deconstruction of the male gaze:

Investment in the look is not as privileged in women as in men. More than the other senses, the eye objectifies and masters ... The moment the look dominates, the body loses its materiality. (Irigaray; 1990 8)

Both the choreographic techniques and visual representations of the male and female body in ballet bear poignant witness to these arguments. The visual image of the ethereal sylphide who seems to float and suspend in the air is a potent image of disembodiment. Roger Copeland, in *Dance, Photography and the World's Body*, argues that while dance has routinely been defined as the art of the human body in motion, choreographers have often chosen to conceal the actual human form:

As long as dance, like the other arts, was envisaged as a mode of sublimation ... the dancer's body invariably served a 'higher' end beyond itself. In Romantic Ballet, the body was etherealised; 'spirituality' could only be achieved by transcending its materiality. (Copeland; 1983 518)

Thus the sylphide defies the laws of gravity to become spirit: the unattainable, ideal woman who lures man from the earth to the sky, from the secular to the sacred. The ballerina is constantly being lifted above and out of her materiality, away from the natural groundedness of the physical body - either by her male partner (the *pas de deux*), her arabesques which point upward or her rising *en pointe*. Judith Lynne Hanna also cites the example of partnering - the *pas de deux* - in ballet as an instance of the way gender roles in dance have contributed to perceptions of male/femaleness. She argues that this rising *en pointe* renders the female dancer as insubstantial: unable to stand alone, the man supports or assists her (Hanna; 1988 172). These techniques and the voyeuristic, usually male choreographic eye, place the ballerina on display. She presents herself to be admired and looked on from a distance. As Copeland points out, there is, also, no male equivalent for the corps de ballet: and the choreographer who manipulates that corps "stands apart from his creation" (Copeland; 1993 139). This visual distance is a fantasy, a conceptual construct located in mind and eye.

This image of woman as chaste, passive and dependent on her male counterpart is one way that the Romantic Ballet represents and relies on female archetypes - and a clear example of the way gender construction has found images through dance. According to Paglia, the archetypes of woman - virgin, mother, whore - are part of a tradition that passes unbroken from prehistoric idols through literature and art to modern film. She suggests that the primary image is the *femme fatale* - "the woman fatal to man":

The more nature is beaten back in the West, the more the *femme fatale* reappears as a return of the repressed. The permanence of the *femme fatale* as a sexual persona is part of the weary weight of eroticism, beneath which both ethics and religion founder. (Paglia; 1991 15 - emphasis mine)

Theophilé Gautier's descriptive reviews of the era of the flowering of the Romantic Ballet, provides a formidable archive within which to research images of the dancing body. His writing offers sumptuous accounts of the contradictory ideals of truth and beauty upheld in the image of the ballerina. In a review of *La Tempête* (1834), Gautier compares the "Christian" dancing of Mlle Taglioni to the "pagan" performances of Fanny Elssler:

Mlle Taglioni ... floats like a spirit in a transparent mist of white muslin ... Fanny Elssler ... recalls the muse Terpsichore with her tambourine and her tunic slit to reveal her thigh ... Undoubtedly spirituality is something to be respected, but in the dance, a few concessions have to be made to reality. After all, dancing has no other purpose but to display beautiful bodies in graceful poses and develop lines that are pleasing to the eye. (Gautier; 1986 16)

Indeed, it is this element of *display* that reveals the paradoxical tensions that occur with stereotypical images. Ramsay alludes to this in a discussion of the pleasures derived from white spectators watching the spectacle of black dancing bodies. He quotes the photographer, David Bailey, who suggests that within the process of stereotyping:

There is a complex ambivalence in operation. This is a concept based on *otherness* and *difference*. Here the stereotype derives from an underlying fear of the subject which is combined with desire and fascination. (Ramsay; 1995 120)

The ambivalent sexual morality that structures pleasure as lying somewhere between fear and desire is captured sublimely in a ballet like *La Sylphide*: the young Scotsman, in true romantic fashion, desires the unattainable. He abandons his secular love (his earthly fiancée) for an ideal, sacred passion (the sylphide). It could be argued, then, that in the Romantic Ballet, the primary image of woman is the *femme fatale*. The two archetypes (virgin and whore; the pure and the unclean)

set the parameters for the playing out of romantic love, for the chivalry of heterosexuality. Again, as Paglia humorously notes:

Romantic love is the spell by which man puts his sexual fear to sleep .. agape, spiritual love, belongs to eros, but has run away from home.
(Paglia; 1991 35)

Ironically then, the image of the virginal sylphide simultaneously embraces a subdued eroticism. Copeland, for example, suggests that Gautier's writing often bordered on "soft porn":

In its obsessive fetishising of the ballerina's body parts, i.e. "her (Fanny Elssler's) leg, smooth as marble, gleams through the frail mesh of her silk stocking". (Copeland; 1993 145)

Perhaps this suggested eroticism found completion in the dubious social status of the ballerina. Dance historians have documented the ways in which balletomania became fashionable for reasons other than the artistic. As Jack Anderson notes:

One box in the theatre quickly acquired the nickname of the *loge infernale*, for there sat fashionable men-about-town whose interest in ballet was something other than purely aesthetic.
(Anderson; 1986 69)

Degas' famous ballerina paintings of this period also lend visual credibility to these arguments.

It is not surprising then, that the 1912 *Ballet Russes* premier of Nijinsky's *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* in Paris caused an uproar and riot. Its theme of sexual awakening, with its "measured eroticism" (Hanna), by a male performer (Nijinsky himself), certainly challenged the aesthetic and sexual morality of the time. Ramsay explains that conventions generally dictate that no spectator should be shown the male body "as if he were the object of a pleasurable gaze":

This is because the spectator is presumed to be male and his dominant male gaze a heterosexual one. In theatre dance, the acceptable male dancer is, following this line of argument, one who, when looked at by the audience, proves that he measures up to supposedly unproblematic male ideals: he looks actively at his female partner or upwards in an uplifting way; he appears powerful, uses large, expansive movements; he controls and displays women dancers in duets. (Ramsay; 1995 72)

These arguments reveal that within dance discourses there has been a dominant narrative that perpetuates and follows a neutral sexuality - heterosexuality. And following this, that there are neutral, normative, reasonable practices as opposed to radical, subversive practices. But as Christopher Winter remarks:

All dance, because it uses gendered bodies, can be read in terms of sexual politics. (Winter; 1989)

Contemporary British choreographer, Lloyd Newson, extends this idea:

But the Royal Ballet is about sexual politics. I mean, when you see *Swan Lake*, it's all about sexual politics. You just don't call it that. It depends how you view it. (Newson: Interview)

Newson's words allude to the ways in which the presumed official image of the dancing body becomes dominant and *natural*. It is seen as a neutral, primary image, disguising or rendering invisible the sexual politics which underpins its aesthetic and performance. These examples also reveal the ways in which the thematic concerns of any dance aesthetic translate into and directly inform the techniques and vocabularies required to produce the dance. As South African dancer and choreographer, Jay Pather, observes:

If dance is not just an unquestioning imposition of particular techniques and idiosyncratic style, but the evocation of movement possibilities within a body ... the notion of a particular dancers shape would naturally cease to exist. (Pather; 1991 4)

It thus follows that in ballet, in order to conjure up the physical illusions of ethereality, lightness would be a pre-requisite. In his book, *From Petipa to Balanchine*, Tim Scholl has a chapter entitled "Unkind Weight". He discusses the body problem in ballet:

Conventional attempts to hide the dancing body address the ballet's primary problem: the struggle to overcome gravity. (Scholl;1994 117)

And hence, we receive the *ideal* dancing body: the weightless female dancer. And weightlessness requires the body of the female dancer to be thin, nubile, always young. In order then for this image to be fully realised, its binary rationale demands that the male dancing body be oppositional to the female body: hence, the ideal male dancing body requires a machoism dependent on muscular strength and a chivalrous virility.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the choreographic techniques of early modern dance and postmodern dance demanded a revolution that located movement vocabulary in a tactile, kinetic experience: techniques that evolved from the choreographers own bodies rather than ones patterned onto the body from the visual imagination. Copeland suggests that the repudiation of late 19th century ballet was not primarily aesthetic, but "essentially moral and political" (Copeland; 1991 10). He cites the point made by Kendall who has argued that the portion of the body most directly affected by the corset - the solar plexus - became the focal point of the new dance aesthetic of choreographers like Duncan and Graham (Copeland; 1991 12).

The early American postmodern experimentation of choreographers like Rainer, Tharp, and Monk removes even further the visual framing of the male gaze by breaking down barriers between audience and performers (new performance spaces) and by focussing on task related

choreographic processes and techniques rooted strongly in kinetic, tactile experience and expression. These techniques and vocabularies, furthermore, did not require either the virtuosity or technical formulas produced by ballet, with the result that the image of the dancing body as a visual spectacle was often subverted (2).

Nonetheless, the monopoly over the dancing body by ballet criteria, still shapes the public imagination and prescribes the *look* of a dancer. In this regard, the model that inspires the dancing body is still structurally and aesthetically influenced by a balletic criterion. South African choreographer, Jay Pather, alludes to the way in which the dancing body becomes a stereotypical representation when he points out that:

Dancer's bodies are trapped in images and therefore by definition a lack of reality ... Why are there so few black women contemporary and ballet dancers? What is it? What is it that has been created as a blueprint for body type and body movement that is so exclusive, that is so difficult to attain that so few actually fit this description? (Pather; 1990)

Pather's argument is an indictment of the way conventional dance has colluded with the media and advertisers - the "major players who also wield economic power" - to produce "narcissism, exclusivity and disempowerment" (Pather; 1991 4). Examples of this collusion pervade dance history. For example, the Balanchine dancer essentially does not present a body shape that differs significantly from the models encountered in fashion magazines: the nubile, almost adolescent body images terrify in their narcissistic attempts to keep aging processes at bay. They become exclusive because they promenade universal ideals of beauty which the average female body can never attain.

2. The vocabularies explored were often minimalist, gestural and pedestrian. Costumes also became more functional and everyday clothing or rehearsal gear was often worn in performance.

Research has indicated that the genesis of many illnesses related to eating disorders (anorexia, bulimia) are linked to a poor self-esteem that arises from the failure to realise these stereotypical ideals.

The supposed neutrality of the ballet body is unmasked through comparisons with different aesthetics. In South Africa, the athleticism and daring of the dance vocabulary of The First Physical Theatre Company has often provoked criticisms about its danger to the body. No-one, however, disparages the liabilities produced through the *unnatural* formulas imposed on the body through balletic vocabulary. In the dance world, many confessional exposés have documented the debilitating effects of creating and maintaining this exclusive body type. Revealingly, most of these chronicles come from the dancers themselves (3).

Pather's insights also expose the extent to which ballet has dominated our theatre dance heritage in South Africa. While it is impossible to provide an exhaustive analysis of the historical and political development of ballet in South Africa, a cursory glance at the structures of dance institutions in South Africa up to 1990, discloses the monopoly held over theatre dance by the state funded arts councils. Furthermore, where African dances were granted recognition, they were presented as "primitive ethnological curiosities" or "side attractions" on the fringes of Arts festivals (Masekela; 1990). Ballet has historically been posited as the neutral, acultural ideal for theatre dance in South Africa. Dance anthropologist, Joann Kealiinohomoku, in an article entitled: *An Anthropologist Looks At Ballet as a Form Of Ethnic Dance* (1970), provides some valuable explanations which can

3. Gelsey Kirkland (*Dancing On My Grave*; Penguin Books: 1988) and Suzanne Farrell (*Holding Onto The Air*; New York: Simon and Schuster: 1990) are prime examples of dancers who have written books that chronicle their physical and emotional struggles through a ballet career.

assist an investigation into some of the reasons why ballet has been projected as the ultimate, normative standard for dance. She raises objections to the ways in which dance scholars and critics have perpetuated a binary "we" versus "they" divide between Western dance forms and "ethnic" or "primitive" dance forms. She asks the crucial question: Why has ballet become acultural:

Why are we afraid to call it [ballet] an ethnic form? The answer, I believe, is that Western dance scholars have not used the word *ethnic* in an objective sense; they have used it as a euphemism for such old-fashioned terms as 'heathen', 'pagan', 'savage', or the more recent term 'exotic'. (Kealiinohomoku: 1983 546)

Kealiinohomoku argues convincingly that it becomes redundant to speak of an *ethnic* dance - since any dance could legitimately fit that description. Her argument thus provides a space within which to deconstruct and destabilise the way ballet has insidiously and invisibly become projected as the standard for Western theatre dance. In South Africa, positive developments can be witnessed since the release of Mandela in 1990. The ANC's programme of reconstruction and development has attempted to dismantle the colonial structures that have penetrated our consciousness. The euphoria of liberation, however, initiates its own host of hurdles and challenges. These will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Two.

Clearly then, a close interrogation and deconstruction of the dance histories we have received reveals the dancing body to be a social, historical construction. Acknowledging the gendered, social construction of both the informal and formal representations of the body has vast implications for research methodologies. Wise and Stanley stress that, within traditional epistemology, body and emotion had been perceived as "disruptive and subversive of knowledge - a wild zone unamenable to reason and its scientific apparatus of investigation and control" (Wise; 1993 193).

As Wise and Stanley propose:

We cannot just deconstruct binary categories as linguistically constituted; we need to change them at the level of experience, of practice, and here the body has an indubitable experiential importance that cannot be reduced to the linguistic alone.
(Wise; 1993 200)

The potential of post-structuralist approaches, valuing experiential knowledge, reveals that there is no way of moving *outside* experientially derived understandings of the social world. A feminist historiography of dance, given its concern with the body, can reclaim the intelligence of the body and challenge its denial. And a feminist dance practice can contest patriarchal representations beyond the purely linguistic and academic.

The philosopher, Nietzsche, in an article entitled, *Of the Despisers of the Body*, commented on the body's denial and domination by reason:

You say 'I' and you are proud of this word. But greater than this - although you will not believe in it - is your body and its great intelligence, which does not say 'I' but performs 'I'. (Shiach; 1991 81)

This notion of a *thinking body* that *performs* both thinking and doing thus challenges the Cartesian dualism of an irreconcilable mind/body division. It returns to the confiscated body its subjectivity. Morag Shiach, in her analysis of Cixous' *l'écriture féminine*, argues that Cixous derives from Nietzsche a commitment to moving beyond categories of the rational and knowable towards a "site of creation, of multiple subjectivity, and the bodily roots of human culture". (Shiach' 1991 82)

Theatre theorist, Antonin Artaud, echoed this commitment and his own *l'écriture féminine*, embodied in his visions for a "theatre of cruelty", called for a "shattering" of language in order to contact body, life. His artistic

manifesto declared a call to "break theatre's subjection to the text" and to:

Rediscover the idea of a kind of unique language somewhere between gesture and thought... Metaphysics must be made to enter the mind through the body.
(Artaud; 1089; 105)

His focus on reclaiming the body has made his writing accessible to dance practitioners and it is interesting to note that Artaud has become a recurring reference in contemporary dance discourses (4).

In dance, the artistic manifestos and choreography of postmodern thinking are all potent examples of the ways in which dance is attempting its own *l'écriture féminine*. In this, the recognition that that which is socially constructed can be deconstructed offers a challenge to dance practitioners to engage in a meaningful, yet critical way with inherited dance practices.

4. Dance critic, Fiona Burnside, has, for example drawn parallels between Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty and the "latent physical danger and violence" explored in the postmodern experimentation of Belgian choreographers like Wim Vanderkeybus and Anne-Terese de Keersmaecker (Burnside; 1990). Lesley-Anne Sayers, in a discussion of British dance company, DV8, has also linked their aesthetic to an Artaudian ethos (Sayers; 1993). South African choreographer, Gary Gordon, has quoted Artaud in the programme note for his work, *Shattered Windows* (1989), in his production called *Declarations* (1994) which was presented at the 1994 Standard Bank National festival of the Arts in Grahamstown.

CHAPTER II

BODY POLITICS IN POSTMODERN DISCOURSES

2.1. The Return of the Repressed.

Postmodern discourses have become identified with the phrase *return of the repressed*. This identifies one of the critical strategies of the postmodern challenge to traditional patriarchal discourses: the deconstruction of logocentric binarism. The resultant fractures have created a space within which the traditionally excluded/silenced *other* can begin to emerge. In this way, postmodern discourses bear witness to the return of the repressed.

Thomas Docherty, in his book, *After Theory: Postmodernism/Postmarxism*, suggests that the postmodern condition in its most basic aspect embodies "the orientation towards alterity". He argues that this "ethics of alterity" embraces heterogeneity: that it is an orientation towards principles of "self-difference" rather than towards unity (Docherty; 1990 20). This alterity allows the art work to claim an eclecticism which enables it to draw on a wide range of signifying and cultural practices as well as acknowledging its "temporal location" and "historical mutability" as a work of art (Docherty; 1990 20). Postmodern techniques of deconstruction, in attempting to displace and destabilise the meta political and cultural narratives of Western art and dance forms, embrace difference and plurality. Within a postmodern theoretical paradigm, meaning is thus never fixed, but only interpreted in relation to and in dialogue with other signifiers, discourses. Jacques Derrida clarifies this position when he argues that, in the absence of a centre/origin, all has become language/discourse:

The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the interplay of signification ad infinitum. (Kearney; 1986 116)

One of the features that recurs in postmodern choreography is the de-centring of the subject. This choreographic strategy was articulated by Merce Cunningham (and the Judson group) in the early 1950's and served, at one level, to leave meaning/interpretation open-ended. No longer was a dance required to have a central focal axis on which a solo performer spun. It is one of the most revolutionary innovations in addressing the master-knowledge legacy of Western forms. As Margaret Whitford explains, it puts the credentials of the "knower" into question (Whitford; 1991 29). Within such a context, the *truth* of fixed and final meanings are opened out to "differance" (5) - the play of multiple, heterogeneous signifiers which only generate meaning in relation to other signifiers.

The postmodern refusal to subject meaning to closure is realised by employing a variety of techniques which represent a fragmented, discontinuous viewpoint. Some of these techniques include the following: incongruous juxtaposition, to reveal alternative voices (binary fact is replaced by multiple fictions); inter-textuality; pastiche; irony and parody; circular narrative strategies. Postmodern dance also embraces a holistic, multi-disciplinary approach which allows a variety of artistic forms to operate within the dance - mime, text, movement, acting, design, music. In this way, verbal and non-verbal communication are assigned equality - the symbolic split which allocates mind/the spiritual/the ideal to man and the body/the corporeal/the natural to women, is interrogated and destabilised. The binary logic displaced.

The allegations and accusations of a *neo-conservativism* that postmodern dance has provoked seem to suggest that its ironic strategies produce elitist, self-indulgent dance, pointing to a failure of the imagination, social responsibility and communication - that art/dance is suffering a type of *death*, that anything goes. Dance historian, Peter Brinson, examines and develops this argument:

One of the characteristics claimed for modernism and postmodernism is a repudiation of the past ... Thus artists and audiences are confronted with the postmodern choice, to follow the consequences of consumer society or to evolve a reaction to its vulgarities ... All the more need for choreographers to work from meaning towards movement rather than from movement towards meaning, which is a postmodern approach. Performance is a beginning, not an end.

(Brinson; 1991 28)

While supporting Brinson's argument for social responsibility and the need for dance to communicate, his prescriptive call for choreographers to reject a postmodern choreography seems to miss entirely the body politics of the postmodern project and its potential political agenda for dance discourses. Homi Bhabha, in his book, *The Location of Culture*, interprets and dispels much of the cacophony surrounding postmodern discourses when he states that:

If the jargon of our times - postmodernity, postcoloniality, postfeminism - has any meaning at all, it does not lie in the popular use of the 'post' to indicate sequentiality - after-feminism; or polarity - anti-modernism. These terms that insistently gesture to the beyond, only embody its restless and revisionary energy if they transform the present into an expanded and ex-centric site of experience and empowerment. (Bhabha; 1994 68)

A crucial point that Bhabha urges here is that postmodernism is not a "periodizing" concept. French deconstructionist, Jean-Francois Lyotard, has in fact, suggested, that postmodernism is the founding condition of the possibility of modernism:

What then is the postmodern? ... It is undoubtedly part of the modern ... What space does Cezanne challenge? The Impressionists. What object do Picasso and Braque attack? Cezanne's ... In an amazing acceleration, the generations precipitate themselves. A work can only become modern if it is first postmodern ... Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in its nascent state. (Lyotard in Readings; 1991 54)

As Docherty argues, thinking postmodernism in this way has a dramatic effect. It no longer becomes merely a "batch of art that comes after 1945" (Docherty; 1990 17). Rather, it becomes important to consider those *moments* in cultural history that have *explicitly* thought of themselves as modern. He goes on to suggest that three such *moments* advance themselves for consideration - the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and the artistic experimentation of the early 20th century. Each of these moments of modernity have within them a "kernel" of a postmodernity:

... for all are dominated by art which is experimenting in the interests of finding and formulating the rules which will govern subsequent art ... the presence of the 'past' is an important guiding concern for such innovations and experimentations. (Docherty; 1990 17 and 18)

The difference with 20th century postmodernism, is that there is a "coterminous and contemporaneous *rejection* of the impulse to modernism and modernity", so we are left with a postmodernism that is "stripped bare" (Docherty; 1990 18).

Reading postmodernism in this way, reveals its creative potential to provoke the dominance of conventional and monolithic universals that present themselves as truth. For example, postmodern deconstructions of *History* allow one to consider the moments in history that have presented themselves for revolt, for change. As Patricia Waugh suggests, historical *periods* do not exist outside the minds of historians and philosophers. She argues

that, within the postmodern project, however, one can begin to offer a tentative genealogy of the postmodern by examining "its range of orientations and responses to the sense of failure of the Enlightenment" (Waugh; 1992). This methodological rejection of a chronological and linear phallogentric logic encompasses a refusal to conceptualise meaning/time/history as having an authentic, unified and universal voice. Iain Chambers, in his exploration of postmodern cultural identities, succinctly captures the historical *dialogues* of postmodern perspectives:

As other histories emerge from the archaeology of modernity to disturb the monologue of History, we are reminded of the multiple rhythms of life that have been written out and forgotten, as the ambiguous, the disruptive and the excessive were reduced to the European accounting of past, present and future. (Chambers; 1994 128)

This opening out of historical discourses offers an opportunity to conceptualise the uneven development of dance revolutions in different countries and in relation to other art forms, to understand its shifting trends and often contradictory manifestations. For example, why the early postmodern minimalism in America (6) emerged as a reaction to the modern dance of choreographers like Graham. And why the postmodern Tanzteater of a choreographer like Pina Bausch, occurring at a similar historical time, was a reaction to and influence of the earlier German "Austruckstanz" (7).

Within such a perspective, the opportunities for conceptualising and formulating dance directions in a country like South Africa can radically alter the destinations and reference points of dance discourses.

6. These postmodern strategies were formulated and articulated by choreographers like Cunningham and the Judson Group.

7. These parallels are historically traced and analysed by Müller (1983) in his article: *Expressionism? "Ausdruckstanz" and the New Dance Theatre in Germany.*

For example, although a modern dance aesthetic has never taken root or fully realised and articulated itself in South Africa, the notion that such a revolution would, historically, *have* to occur because of the way history evolves through stages, becomes highly questionable and contentious. If history does not evolve sequentially, an argument that insists on a necessary stage of modernism/nationalism/commonality for South African theatre dance becomes redundant. That is, the idea that postmodern dance has no place in South Africa if our theatre dance has not even explored modernist traditions, falls away.

Brinson's argument thus becomes tentative and uncertain in the light of reading postmodernity in this way. Postmodern art can make strong and committed social and political statements through its provocation of the patriarchal and logocentric constraints that have fashioned our dance thinking. Choreography becomes political in its postmodernity precisely because it concerns itself less with the production of identity than with the "seduction of difference" (Docherty; 1990 21). Dance theorist, Ana-Sanchez Colberg captures the crux of this debate and points to the creative potential of deconstructive strategies:

Institutionalised truth is decentralised through difference and diversity ... decentralise truth and you decentralise power. The possibility of a discourse other than patriarchy begins to take shape. (Colberg; 1993 160)

2.2. Postmodern Dance In South Africa.

The postmodern perspectives for conceptualising historical moments and sites of change discussed in the earlier part of Chapter Two, provide a useful framework for suggesting possible directions for dance in South Africa, and will inform the arguments that are extended

here. The questions to be addressed are concerned with the ways in which contemporary dance theatre in South Africa succeeds, or fails to succeed, in formulating and articulating a new dance aesthetic: What is happening to South African dance revolutions beyond the pirouette and the toyi-toyi? What is the role and relevance of postmodern dance in South Africa?

The political implications of a postmodern aesthetic assume a rigorous energy and tension in a country like South Africa which is emerging out of a fascist era in which all art, and particularly dance, has suffered extreme censorship, lack of funding and international isolation. Furthermore, the sediments of our colonial and apartheid cultural heritage has deposited a Eurocentric bias at the core of our cultural ethos. As Albie Sachs has pointed out, during the Apartheid era:

The cultural establishment had an umbilical cord that extended in one direction only, to the North Atlantic ... The external boycott imposed by the anti-apartheid movement was visible, acknowledged and circumstantial. The internal boycott of the culture of the majority has been invisible, unacknowledged and deeply structured.

(Sachs; 1991 4)

This Eurocentric bias has provoked a militant reaction from artists and the present reconstruction of our society is imbued with a strong democratic ethos, fuelled also by attempts to reclaim cultural traditions that were suppressed or lost during the reign of apartheid. The massive economic, political, social and artistic transformations and reconstructions taking place at present are directed towards what has become identified as the *politically correct* attitude with which to address and prioritise social accountability and social responsibility within the democratisation of our political structures. Any artistic initiative that deviates from this agenda or which is seen to be conservative, Eurocentric or self-indulgent thus becomes

politically unsound, regarded as reactionary and counter revolutionary. And while the Bill of Rights clearly maintains autonomy and political independence for artists (1994 NAC resolutions adopted), a critical question raises its head: will artists now become their own boards of censorship? That is, to what extent does the politically correct line inform and structure artistic discourses and practices in South Africa? How does this politically correct attitude manifest itself within the dance community?

While there is clearly no crude conspiracy at play, I believe this attitude is fostered and given credence, at one level, through the *unwritten* agenda of dance criticism, which has, up to now, largely centered debate around issues of nationalism (sameness/identity) and commonality. The dance community has been fraught with the attempts at forging an indigenous, South African dance aesthetic. The attempts at fusion through the 1980's and the search for commonality in the early 1990's have left us a legacy of nationalist thinking that the present dance community is struggling to navigate.

Choreographers have begun to question the validity of the search for commonality and a national dance aesthetic. After all, what would such an aesthetic possibly be? Would it only embrace *legitimate* African dances like the gumboot (8) and traditional Zulu dances, or, would it be the attempts at fusion between African and Western dance forms, which up to now, have exhibited a patronising and superficial *sticking together* of various dance traditions? Jay Pather, in an article, *Dance in Search of Commonality* (1991), points out the opportunism and superficiality that attempts at hybrid forms have often produced:

8. Coplan's (1985) research on the gumboot dance has ironically, for example, suggested possible American influences.

Hence dance that tries to be a hybrid, which tries to incorporate the outer shell of forms will remain self-conscious and uncomfortable. Muddling ahead with desperate intention and motive, we create a melting pot of dance styles for the new South Africa, putting together diverse cultural products, dressed up in ethnic printed costumes and posited as visionary. This may have been a necessary stage to pass through but essentials are being missed and we must watch ourselves becoming at best swept up by a desperate euphoria, at worst hanging onto a bandwagon driven by opportunism. (Pather; 1991 2)

Where does this leave the search for commonality? Or should this question perhaps be re-assessed - is there a need to pursue commonality at all? One could, for example, argue that dance in South Africa is ideally suited to the diversity, plurality and difference that is pursued by postmodern discourses. Far from being a Eurocentric import, I believe it could be legitimately argued that the plurality of forms, the plurality of bodies and voices in South Africa, already contains the potential to explore alternatives to nationalist visions. Dance practitioners have suggested that theatrical performances like *Woza Albert!*; *The Hungry Earth*; *The Ugly Noo Noo*; and *Feedback* have already set a precedent for exploring diversity and difference through a holistic theatre experience (9). The dance aesthetic of companies like *Jazzart* and *The First Physical Theatre Company* and choreographers like Robyn Orlin and P.J. Sabbagha, have also already provided alternatives to synthesis or "hybrid" (Pather; 1991) dance forms.

The attempts at rescuing African traditions that have been *lost* becomes a highly romanticized enterprise. Bhabha, in an assessment of the historian, Franz Fanon's writing, points to the dangers inherent in this yearning nostalgia for nationalism. He suggests that Fanon is:

9. Sichel mentions this point (Interview: 1995), as does Gordon when he "demands" that physical theatre become "more than a minority preoccupation" (Gordon: 1993 30).

... far too aware of the dangers of the fixity and fetishism of identities within the calcification of colonial cultures to recommend that "roots" be struck in the celebratory romance of the past or by *homogenizing the history of the present*.

(Bhabha; 1994 9 - emphasis mine)

Bhabha also notes that the theoretical paradigms that have supported ideas about nationalist discourses are presently being re-written and re-conceptualised:

The very concepts of homogeneous national cultures, the consensual or contiguous transmission of historical traditions, of "organic" ethnic communities - as the grounds of cultural comparativism - are in a profound process of redefinition. (Bhabha; 1994 4)

Bhabha suggests that the wider significance of the postmodern condition lies precisely in the awareness that the epistemological limits of "those ethnocentric ideas" are also the "enunciative boundaries of a range of other dissonant, even dissident histories and voices - women, the colonized, minority groups, the bearers of policed sexualities" (Bhabha; 1994 6). Bhabha's argument takes us back to the *return of the repressed*, highlighting the potential that postmodern discourses offer as a politics of emancipation from the metaphysics of patriarchal binarism. In this sense, postmodern thinking could not better suit the conditions of political "necessity" in South Africa. Bhabha extends this argument:

Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The 'past-present' becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living.

(Bhabha; 1994 7)

I believe that through experimenting with this cultural diversity and difference, dance in South Africa might reach a place where it is comfortable to explore "the other" - to perform an-other South African voice.

Given that dance scholarship is its infancy here, the dance community in South Africa is forced to rely, for debate, on the writings of critics, monitoring the developments of dance platforms and dance education, and dance performances themselves - possibly the most telling tales. The lack of a comprehensive and rigorous dance discourse repeats, with the violence of Sisyphus, the agendas of political correctness: both the politically correct promotion of commonality, as well as a purist, ballet influence which promotes balletic techniques and choreographic methods as a neutral standard.

Dance platforms like the FNB Vita Dance Umbrella (10) and the Fringe on the Grahamstown National Festival of the Arts have provided significant platforms for realising and articulating the changing dancescape in South Africa. As Adrienne Sichel has remarked, these platforms help to create a theatre dance culture, to "train an audience" (Sichel; Interview: 1995). They have also provided a context within which contemporary dance can pursue, autonomously, its own directions. As Sichel also acknowledges, these platforms have often been the birthing sites that have catapulted choreographers and dancers into a world of professional dance (11). There can be no doubt that these platforms provide a critical terrain for developing the art of choreography, and for

10. The FNB Vita Dance Umbrella was launched in 1989 to provide a "free professional platform for the full spectrum of contemporary South African choreography" (FNB Vita Dance Umbrella Information Sheet). As an experimental platform for original choreography, the Umbrella has gained so much support from the dance community that it has now launched provincial dance umbrellas: Vita Indaba; Vita Shongololo and Vita Kopano. The launch of the Eastern Cape Vita Umdudo is anticipated for April 1996 and is to be hosted by the Rhodes University Drama Department.

11. Sichel, for example, cites the careers of the Sowetan dance group, *Street Beat*, who are now performing in America; and Vincent Mantsoe, who has suddenly risen to fame, as two cases that were "launched" through exposure at the Dance Umbrella.

stimulating and inspiring the dance community in its creative visions.

And yet, dance performances and dance reviews still reveal a dance theatre landscape influenced to a large extent by both a nationalist and ballet thinking. Strange bedfellows? Is this simply a problem with categorisations and terminology - for example, is modern ballet being called contemporary dance? Or is this a deeper structural and conceptual problem within South African theatre dance? One that has to be rigorously addressed, rather than one that will spontaneously evolve. It appears that contemporary works are still being created and evaluated according to a subterraneous criteria of ballet. Factors like the skill of dancers, spectacle and virtuosity, still dog choreography. Sichel, who views an enormous range of dance, acknowledges that dance in South Africa is "very locked into technique" (Sichel; Interview: 1995). In this sense, choreography often relies on, either the virtuosic spectacle of the official dancing body to achieve its distinction and excellence, or politically correct contents that are as comforting as they are complacent.

What then are the alternatives? Pather suggests that the answers do not necessarily lie in retaining purist, separate forms. He rather suggests that we "stay with the dance, its essence and origin", without "motive", in the hope that through an "undivided consciousness", one not "cloaked" in fear and guilt, this "awareness" will eventually allow a sense of commonality to emerge:

The commonality we seek out of fear, perhaps, guilt, desperation, we seek to wear this commonality like a cloak that may reasonably hide the scars and the not yet dry pus of prejudice. Our search besides being divisive is full of motive ... we are still talking from our dividing lines, our constituencies, our form is still intact, because our sense of self is so protected and immovable. (Pather; 1991 2)

Pather's insights here echo the arguments presented in Chapter One which revealed the ways in which patriarchal structures are dominated by a masculine principle which insists on defining and naming *essences*. The desire to define an essence of commonality in dance has to be read in the context of a larger Nationalist political agenda which urges the creation of a national, undivided, South African identity - the Rainbow Nation. If the ideology of apartheid can be interpreted as the imposition of a *metaphysics of difference* upon a different (12), then surely an uncritical conception of commonality can ironically be seen to perpetuate the metaphysics of nationalism in that, here, it amounts to nothing more than the imposition of a *metaphysics of sameness* upon the different. I believe that the sooner the dance community abandons the quest for a South African dance identity and embraces the plurality and diversity that structures our social world, the sooner we will be able to generate an open yet critical dialogue about *form*. Then the directions and aesthetic revolutions that dance is seeking will have a space to emerge and evolve.

For example, I would propose that within the search for commonality, and within the processes of synthesis, choreographic forms have remained superficial, sporadic and disintegrated. While the thematic content of dances that have attempted fusion might have successfully challenged the official dance status quo, the *choreographic* collaborations never developed sufficiently to sustain these attempts at provocation or deconstruction.

12. In this regard, compare Edward Said: "One can, declare oneself *for* difference (as opposed to sameness or homogenization) without at the same time being for the rigidly enforced and policed separation of populations into different groups". *An Ideology Of Difference* in Gates 1986; 38.

The following example serves as a case study to illustrate this argument (13). *Southern Women*, an all-woman company based in Cape Town, emerged in 1989, at a time when the ideas of Western-African fusion/synthesis were fashionable and seen as a bridge for political and cultural expression at a time of heightened political repression. Following the manifestos of its predecessor companies (*Abanamanyani* and *Isigazini*), *Southern Women* explored social themes of oppression. Abanamanyani's work, *Rhythm of Change* (1986) was a collaboration between Jazzart (Hinkel), Samwabo Masepe (traditional African dance and based in Langa) and a number of frustrated independents like Maria Gensen and Balu Searl. The work, which explored violence in South Africa (necklace murders, for example), enjoyed a successful season before disintegrating due to "political pressure" (Searl; Interview: 1994).

After the company's demise, Isigazini was formed and its work, *In The Blood* (1988/1989), was an attempt to "unravel the ironies" (Searl; Interview: 1994) of race, class and personal relationships between women in South Africa - particularly the *maids and madams* scenario. According to Searl, this company, too, only enjoyed one season before collapsing. Searl suggests that both companies were too "innocent" to cope with the political pressures of the 1980's. Apart from the practical problems with regard to funding, detentions, lack of rehearsal spaces and transport, the very different political agendas of this diverse group, ranging from white liberals to politically involved unionists, created unbridgeable conflicts which could not be resolved. A

13. This case study was compiled in April 1994 for a working paper that was presented as part of my coursework. Having been a member of the company for three years, many of the insights offered are based on personal experience. These were supported by interviews conducted with company members: Balu Searl and Jenny von Papendorp; and informal discussions of the company's work with ex-member: Ilona Frege. Samantha Pienaar also provided a critical sounding board for debate on the company's work.

contentious issue was which arts festivals could be attended and which boycotted. A group of disillusioned *left-overs* from both these companies thus attempted a new angle: women's issues.

Southern Women's most successful work, *Wild Honey*, was performed all over the country at various dance platforms - the Dance Umbrella, the Grahamstown Festival, night clubs in Johannesburg, political rallies. It was also re-worked many times between 1989 and 1991. In 1991 it was nominated for an A.A.Vita award and the company was invited to perform at the Dance Umbrella in 1992. This work explored both the strength and struggles of women in resisting their political and social oppression, utilising images of veiled women: voiceless and hidden, as well as their endurance and celebratory spirit/power in unity. The dance vocabulary was an eclectic fusion of many different dance styles - Spanish, African, bellydancing and contemporary dance - which were shaped through improvisation and contact work.

Although a member of the company at that time, and supporting and experimenting with the attempts at synthesis, in retrospect, I believe that the choreographic form remained superficial and disintegrated. A central contributing factor could have been that there was no *outside* choreographic eye directing, articulating and developing the vocabulary and form. While the content, the use of a plurality of bodies (the dancers ranged from 16 to 40 years of age) and movement styles certainly challenged patriarchal images, the collaboration in terms of form, never developed sufficiently to sustain attempts at deconstructing the image of the dancing body. In fact, audiences were often confused as they found themselves staring at a bevy of beautiful female bodies - there were always plenty of cat calls. The company appears to have re-lived a pattern of

demise that dogged its predecessors: it did not have a clearly articulated choreographic agenda in terms of its artistic vision/form/vocabulary with which to reinforce and sustain its social and political agendas.

This pattern appears to have thwarted the development of many companies. While the more obvious constraints like lack of funding, rehearsal spaces and availability of performance platforms have certainly contributed, there is a deeper structural problem facing South African choreographers: the lack of focus on choreographic crafting. I would argue that within the present artistic environment, this choreographic lethargy or passivity has to be challenged.

Robyn Orlin suggests "content and form are the next steps" that choreographers in South Africa have to take:

South Africans have been and are grappling so much with some kind of an identity, and have been struggling so much to prove themselves within the environment, that there hasn't been this kind of play with form. (Orlin; Interview: 1995)

Orlin has suggested that one way of stimulating discourse and debate about content and form is to have a dance/art magazine that specifically deals with artistic concerns. As she notes:

I can only re-iterate that we do not have a magazine, a compilation of people writing about their different art forms and opening up discourse. It's not only the critics who are going to shape dance, it's the people, the community, who are going to shape dance. (Orlin; Interview: 1995)

Orlin's suggestion is a call to choreographers to articulate and formulate clear visions for their work - based on their creative artistic agendas. A dance magazine would provide a terrain for all dance practitioners to share their concerns and experiences in both an academic and creative context. South African

choreographers need to develop the confidence and trust in themselves that inspire original work. A dance magazine would be one arena where dance debate could be generated that would aid these developmental processes.

The significant changes that dance has undergone over the past five years clearly indicate a dancescape in profound processes of re-thinking traditional dance practices. These developments appear to have lost their impetus to formulate effectively and articulate a new aesthetic. This is largely a result of the impotence that has been created through an uncritical pursuit of commonality and the search for one *true* South African dance aesthetic.

Alternative directions need to be explored. Obviously the postmodern *aesthetic* cannot and should not be prescribed for every choreographer or company. However, the experimentation with the diversity and difference embraced by a postmodern *ethos* appears to have vast potential for both *containing* difference and *releasing* diversity: revealing a pathway that might sustain the creative revolutions sought after by dance in South Africa.

CHAPTER III

UNHOMELY HOUSES

This chapter will present an analysis (1) of Gary Gordon's danceplay, *The Unspeakable Story* (1995) and Robyn Orlin's *In a Corner the Sky Surrenders* (1995). The analysis will attempt a postmodern reading of both works. One of the problems of conceptualising postmodern dance is a methodological one: it disallows its subject/speaker any finality in *naming* and thus resists definition and categorisation. Following this logic, it becomes difficult to unequivocally name these works as postmodern. Nonetheless, this analysis will attempt to show that beneath the *look* and *feel* of both works, there lies subterraneously a postmodern ethos, with many of the choreographic methods employed embodying postmodern strategies of deconstruction. This analysis is concerned with the ways in which these postmodern strategies offer and realise radical alternatives to mainstream theatre dance in South Africa.

3.1. Artistic Manifestos.

Artistic director and choreographer for *The First Physical Theatre Company*, Gary Gordon, has described the company's aesthetic as being "as much a theatre of action as a theatre of ideas" (Handley; 1995 55). Embodied in this artistic manifesto which I have entitled, the "dancing master's treason" (2), is a challenge to

1. In transferring spoken language to written language I have edited the quotations from interviews with these choreographers, with the agreement of my supervisor, for reasons of clarity and space. The changes are predominantly grammatical. The complete interviews are available on tape.

2. This is a line taken from the text of Gary Gordon's "past"modern dance charade: *Can Baby John Fit Into Big Daddy's Shoes?* (1994). In this work, the "dancing

assumptions that place dancing and choreography as *feeling* activities, as opposed to *thinking* ones. Gordon's words also dispel the myths that surround the act of choreographic crafting: that choreography is produced by an innate creative talent inspired by a benevolent Tersichorean muse. As Handley suggests, Gordon is quick to point out that physical theatre is "not just another way of moving, but a different approach to movement and to making theatre: a different philosophy" (Handley; 1995 55).

This statement is borne out by the wide range of the company's repertory. As Gordon indicates, one of the things that characterises the company's aesthetic is that there is no "pristine language" or choreographic style. The repertory system thus ensures that no single dance style, artistic medium or body type dominates the aesthetic of the company. Because the performers create the works in dialogue with a range of artistic mediums and with different choreographers, a multiplicity of dance and theatre styles can emerge. In this way, a dominant aesthetic is never affirmed. This derives also from physical theatre's holistic approach to creative collaboration. Priority is not given to any *one* theatrical element: verbal and non-verbal are assigned equality, and in this way, the symbolic binary logic of patriarchal representations is subverted - the logocentric rationale is decentralised through diversity and difference.

Although the company has always pursued a collaborative and experimental ethos, *The Unspeakable Story* is the first true collaboration (Gordon; 1995) where everything was created for an original work. Gordon urges that this

master's treason", at one level of the narrative, is his seduction of "Little Johnny", one of his dance students. Gordon's "past" modern playfulness, however, extends this treason by deconstructing theatre and dance traditions thereby making his choreography, the "dancing master's treason".

was made possible because of funding from the Foundation for the creative arts. Gordon resists defining the company's aesthetic as postmodern, choosing rather to focus attention on the artistic processes of creation that inspire his work. As he proposes, in *The Unspeakable Story*, the unspeakable event itself (the suicide of Magritte's mother), and the fact that Magritte never spoke about it, was what fascinated the artists and inspired the work's images:

What we were dealing with as collaborators, was that *that* story just drove us *mad*. It was with us all the time, many of our artistic decisions came from that. We weren't trying to make a postmodern work.

(Gordon; Interview: 1995)

Nonetheless, when questioned about the influences of surrealism in *The Unspeakable Story*, Gordon's reply offers a postmodern reading of the way the work has been influenced by a variety of artistic traditions:

I think I do respond to postmodern trends, but then postmodernism looks back at surrealism and dadaism, so perhaps that's how that has come about - that fragmentation, that distortion - so perhaps its something I've always been interested in and therefore I would, with relish, go to a painter like Magritte. (Gordon; Interview: 1995)

Robyn Orlin, the notorious "national irritation" (3) of the South African dance world over the past fifteen years, similarly refuses to have her work "neatly packaged" (Orlin; 1995). She suggests that although her work is difficult to categorise, it moves more towards dance theatre and performance art. She has found a term which captures the focus of her work, and yet leaves it open enough to defy final definitions:

3. Orlin has stated in an interview with Silke Friedrich (The Sunday Times; 1995) that in the past she was regarded as a "national irritation" and she hoped that because of the way dance had developed, this would change.

For me, the most precise way of summing up my work and my dance aesthetic, is that it is a *dance of the image*. And with that comes the upset and the challenge that I always sustain. I willfully, and sometimes unwillfully, upset or challenge the idea of what dance is, and I think now, also of what art is, and what theatre is. (Orlin; Interview: 1995)

This term appropriately captures her artistic vision and choreographic foresight. Orlin has argued that dance is faced with having to compete increasingly with the celluloid image. The monopoly over image production by the electronic media has become a serious dilemma for those artists involved with an art form as immediate and transient as dance. In a technologised culture, where TV and film can provide an intoxicating rush of visual meaning through sophisticated imagistic illusions, theatre and dance have to rediscover ways of engaging audiences accustomed to such a plethora of visual stimuli. As Orlin pertinently notes:

There's a different kind of concentration being demanded of a public now. Theatre has to work a lot harder visually than before. For me, light is becoming the most important aspect of theatre. (Orlin; Interview: 1995)

In her work, *In a Corner*, these attempts at creating distilled, "taut" and "pared down" (Orlin; 1995) images - closer to the concentrated filmic image - is largely achieved by the performer's manipulation of six clip-on lamps. Each time a new dwelling place is constructed by the street vendor, she visibly places the lights, or at times, a single light, on her home. The audience thus witness how the appropriate illusion is constructed and then deconstructed.

Dance critic, Marilyn Jenkins, has called her work, *In a Corner*, an "animated Dali" (4), while Adrienne Sichel states that "it's like watching an art movie with

4. Jenkins; *The Star Tonight*: 26 September, 1995: *As Orlin Is Now*.

unfurling articulate images" (5). These responses clearly indicate the visual impact of Orlin's work. While the flood of incongruous images and seemingly unrelated events in this work certainly assume an almost Daliesque surrealism, the anarchy of the images presented appear to rely more closely on the playful and ironic strategies of postmodern fragmentation and juxtaposition. American critic, Robert Grieg, echoes this idea in his review of *In a Corner*. He has suggested that Orlin is unsettling because her works refuse to take themselves seriously:

They are cryptic, self-referential, camp and self-mocking ... Audiences are accustomed to form indicating function and signs significance: Orlin denies that linkage. Her works are therefore unstable - that's how her world is - and their tone ambiguous and playful ... this artist is no postman bringing messages or priest bringing sermons and uplifting sentiments. (Grieg; 1994)

The instability and irony that characterises her work is part of the open, circular logic of postmodern methods, which provide no respite or resting places where meanings can comfortably arrive or depart. Orlin herself clearly states that while she does not consciously strategise about postmodern choices, she could claim to be a postmodernist "quite intuitively". As Grieg acknowledges:

The logic of the shifts of tone in the work is not based on alterations in a musical score, but according to a personal logic which is withheld from the viewer. Not knowing the logic but knowing that logic exists is part of the tease element in Orlin's work which provokes the criticism of self-indulgence. (Grieg; 1994)

In South Africa, Orlin's anarchic choreographic structures have often provoked criticisms of "self-indulgence". Critic, Heather Mackie suggests that Orlin has "all the hallmarks of an enfant terrible whose adoring family lack the courage to tell her when to stop"

5. Sichel; *Pretoria News*: 7 March, 1995: *Umbrella Full Of Holes*.

(6). Orlin has responded to these accusations in the following way:

South Africans really have a problem and I say this quite openly. They always need to understand exactly what's going on in art and they always need to be told, otherwise they are left in the dark, and God forbid they should have to think for themselves. (Orlin; Interview: 1995)

While individual responses to Orlin's work would obviously vary, I think that her general criticism about South African audiences is a valid one. This need for linear, direct meaning is essentially a patriarchal construct linked to the notion that it is necessary to define and name meaning. And in both Gordon and Orlin's works, there seems to be a feminine principle at play, which defies a need for final meanings.

The interviews with both choreographers point to the way that creative and artistic urges intuitively, yet with influence, are engaged in the crafting processes. If one considers and analyses the techniques and strategies of postmodernism, it becomes evident that both works - whether consciously or unconsciously - employ postmodern deconstructive tendencies. The eclecticism, historicity and plurality of the works ensure that the dances are less products than *systems* - the music, design and choreography do not claim to be metaphors for a single narrative essence or metaphysical truth. Rather, each system constantly and self-consciously refers to itself, and outwards, with all the elements assuming an ironic interplay and dialogue with each other and with theatre and dance conventions. In this way, the works become the unstable, open systems pursued by postmodern discourses.

6. Mackie; *Business Day*: 9 March, 1995: *Self-indulgent Orlin taxes the outer limits of patience.*

3.2. Thematic Threads: Exile and the 'Unhomely' Moment.

In his book, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity*, Iain Chambers has a chapter entitled, *An Impossible Homecoming*. Here, he suggests that the idea of migrancy and of exile have become a potent motif or suggestive symbol of a postmodern culture:

Migrancy involves a movement in which neither the points of departure nor those of arrival are immutable or certain. It calls for a dwelling in language, in histories, in identities that are constantly subject to mutation. Always in transit, the promise of a homecoming - completing the story, domesticating the detour - becomes an impossibility. History gives way to histories, as the West gives way to the world. (Chambers; 1994 5)

The intriguing title of Gordon's documentary danceplay, *The Unspeakable Story*, similarly provokes a calling into question any final acts of naming, of fixed representations, or, as Chambers would propose, of completing the story or of a final homecoming. The paradox implied in the title (how can one tell a story that is unspeakable?) operates very much like the titles of the surrealist painter and subject of the dance, Magritte's, own paintings. As art critic Olkowski-Laetz argues, Magritte names his paintings in a manner that undermines the obvious relation between the title and the work, the name and the thing, in order to contest the obvious identity of the figure and the name we give it, while dissolving both. She suggests that this:

Upsets the subject-predicate relation projected by language onto things, and leads us to question substance, presence and time, as they have imposed themselves upon the work of art.

(Olkowski-Laetz; D: 1990 109)

In Gordon's work, the title resonates similar strategies of inversion in order to bring into question the very act of representation itself. The word, *story*, instantly

suggests interpretation and was inspired by and refers back to Magritte's painting, *The Central Story*. As Gordon states:

It was narrative that I was dealing with and different ways of looking at that, so *story* was such a wonderful word ... it was also being playful because in our *Unspeakable Story* there was so much speech. (Gordon; Interview: 1995)

The set design also playfully flirts with these concepts: the house, which is painted with Magritte's famed clouds, is inscribed with the following signature at the bottom: *Ceci n'est pas un Magritte* (7). This playful interaction with Magritte's painting, *This is not a Pipe*, serves to question the authorship, authenticity and origins of acts of representation. It is also typical of the inter-textuality that postmodern discourses generate.

Extending his metaphor of exile and migrancy as symbols of a postmodern identity, Chambers purports the following:

In such a rendezvous critical thought is forced to abandon any pretence to a fixed site, as though it offered stable foundations upon which the sense of our lives could be blithely erected ... it is not a permanent mansion but rather a provocation: a platform, a raft, from which we scan the horizon for signs while afloat in the agitated currents of the world. (Chambers; 1994 7)

This condition of exile and/or migrancy can be witnessed in both works, through the physical and emotional agitations of women struggling to be *homed*.

In Orlin's work, home becomes a permanent provocation. The audience follow the central character into her world on the streets and witness her social, political and cultural displacement - embodied in her futile attempts at constructing a fixed condition of "homeliness". Orlin

7. Translation: This is not a Magritte.

has possibly chosen one of the most extreme and ironic instances of migrancy/exile: for, in a curious reversal, the street "bergies", epitomise the social "home" of structural unemployment. As Orlin suggests, this woman is continuously exploring herself and her surroundings" more than anything else, out of *necessity*". Critic, Silke Friedrich, observes that:

By the time the work ends, she has created at least five different configurations of her domicile, and is still not content. The curtain falls on a lonely figure, relentlessly searching for a sense of place. The work highlights the plight of the homeless or countryless. (Friedrich; 1995)

The title of this work, *In a Corner the Sky Surrenders*, alludes to this woman's situation. As Orlin suggests:

In a corner, under the sky, there is a woman with a life. And there are so many of these kind of women and so many of these kind of street people around the world. And in *this* little corner, there is a woman who has a screwed up life ... and as in disarray as it is, she is this incredibly imaginative, creative person. She still finds some kind of inspiration from the box that she is living in, to create. (Orlin; Interview; 1995)

In this way, Orlin never sentimentalises or dramatises this exiled condition. In fact, there is a sense of celebrating its creative potential.

Orlin's selection of props resonate and become potent metaphors with which to explore this *unhomely* condition. In the work, the entire physical and emotional landscape is constructed and deconstructed through the use of a cardboard box, six clip-on lamps, gold lame shoes and two wind-up toys. The audience is confronted with a barrage of distilled and shifting images, as the street woman goes about exploring and shaping herself and her environment. The transformations she achieves by manipulating her mobile home, capture the fluidity of a world which has abandoned the pretence of promises for

fixed and stable foundations. Our first encounter with the street woman finds her precariously balancing on one gold lame shoe. The "aura of displacement" (Sichel; 1995) that accompanies her is signalled through her costume: a gold dress which doesn't zip up entirely, the fact that she has only *one* glove and only *one* gold lame shoe. These cultural icons that Orlin constructs, only to dismantle systematically throughout the work, become critical images through which her vision of the contemporary world and identity are displayed and flaunted. Although the work explores the narratives of this street woman, the images of her world simultaneously implode and explode, to expose the way social icons are culturally and historically constructed. As Orlin states:

I'm interested in cultural history and *In a Corner*, is an accumulation of this woman's history and she's living it out onstage, in the best way that she can in a theatrical setting. (Orlin; Interview: 1995)

In this way, Orlin's work becomes a dialogue with the accumulation of artistic traditions that we have received. As dance critic, Adrienne Sichel suggests:

This starkly dramatic work is also about manipulation and the ability of an artist to control his or her environment. (Sichel; July 1995)

Orlin thus alludes to the elusiveness and instability of a fixed *artistic* home - indeed, what has become the postmodern artistic identity. The thematic threads of building and then breaking down structures is repeated by the props, which, in a sense, all acquire metaphorical invitations to an idea of mobility. The image of a shoe, for example, immediately pursues an idea of walking or journeying: a shoe, a foot, a road.

As Orlin states:

This woman collects shoes. What are shoes? Shoes are the history of a nation, they get you from a to b, they tell a hell of a lot about how a person walks, what type of a person it is. At what point does a shoe get thrown out? (Orlin; Interview: 1995)

Both the shoes and toys assume the weight of cultural icons that have become loaded with social and political meaning. The image of the woman with only one shoe becomes a deep contrast with the elephant, who, by the end of the dance, is laden with shoes and cannot move.

Orlin explains:

I keep on placing these shoes on top of the elephant, and eventually, though the elephant is still activated, the elephant cannot move, and that is the last image in the piece. I flick the lights so that the image looks like a black - and - white movie of this elephant not being able to move. I'm saying that this elephant is trying to move on and it can't because it's being stopped by this heap of gold shoes. (Orlin; Interview: 1995)

Dance critic, Adrienne Sichel, develops a poignant analysis of Orlin's use of shoes as props, contextualising her evolution as choreographer:

And the shoes. There're always shoes in Orlin's orbit. They started out as missiles, in this very theatre, in *The Art of Saying Goodbye*, now they've graduated to sculptural objects of desire and identity - material and sexual. In *In a Corner*, a gold lame classic disappears surrealistically into the air pulled by a toy choo-choo train. A pile of the same shoes turns a cute wind-up elephant into a beast of burden. (Sichel; September 1995)

Sichel hints at the menace and ominous quality that the movements of both the toys and the shoes acquire in this work. The way that the shoes are performed, in relation to her "working toys" (Orlin; Interview: 1995), the wind-up train and the elephant, constantly hints at the social and political histories that they contain and bring with them, and which transform, as they traverse through the

dancescape. Thus, at one level, the toys initiate the audience into the fantasy world of this woman, and at the same time, they specify and accumulate the weight of colonial identities and consumerism. Orlin seems to be attempting a deconstruction of the monolithic identities that the toys initially allude to: she is deconstructing the history of toys. As she reveals:

I love the way the West makes these real trite interpretations of these animals. I was punning with the whole colonial thing, the whole uncomfortable thing of being in Africa. The elephant being the Westerner's plight. Their way of dealing with horrifying Africa, and scary Africa, is by making these mechanical furry animals ... It's something I am fascinated with ... the way the Westerners look at Africa ... how they bury their fears about Africa. (Orlin; Interview: 1995)

Clearly then, far from being simply self-indulgent impulses, Orlin's images can be seen to resonate an abundance of imagistic connections. But the audience has to work and interpret and South African audiences are often uninitiated in this regard.

In Gordon's *The Unspeakable Story*, we journey through the "unfathomable" (De Wet: 1995) house of Magritte's mother. The collaborative ensemble of playwright, Reza De Wet; of designer, Lindy Roberts; of composer, Leonhard Praeg; and of choreographer, Gary Gordon, transports the audience into an interpretation of her world that is at once sensual, aural, visual, motional, emotional. At all these levels, the work inspires this sense of the woman's exile in her home. As Palestinian writer and historian, Edward Said has suggested:

Borders and barriers which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory can also become prisons, and are often defended beyond reason or necessity. Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience. (Chambers; 1994 2)

Working in dialogue with information gleaned from a documentary on Magritte's life (Gordon has described the work as a documentary danceplay), the artists re-present her home as such a possible entrapment. Her emotional exile in the home could be seen as a possible contributing factor that led to her suicide. As Gordon suggests:

I couldn't be that arrogant to say I know why she did it and I don't think in the work we ever provide an answer ... we only have the facts and as artists we responded to that incredibly tragic and moving circumstance ... one of the factors might, perhaps, have been living in this confining little house on this dirty river and the fact that she had a job beforehand and she seemed not to do it anymore. (Gordon; Interview: 1995)

The first image of the woman prepares and paves the way for a journey that leads her towards her house. As she enters, two women, in a ritualistic progression, lay down bricks in front of her. The bricks are placed in an upright fashion, so that each step she takes, makes her journey a very "precarious" (Gordon: 1995) one. While the use of single bricks serves, in an economical way, to deconstruct the image of a home; it simultaneously, discloses the provisional and unstable nature of the home's foundations. As the woman makes her way, she is covered by feathers which suspend and flutter about her. As Gordon has stated, Ms Roberts was shrewd in providing "probing resonances" throughout the work that would provide some idea of this woman. Gordon illustrates his point through the example of the use of the feathers. They recall her trade as a hatmaker. They also become confetti for the new bride as she enters the home of her marriage. Later, in the funeral scene, a woman's voice reminisces about the equipment of the embalming room and recalls that the "black plumes for the horses heads" were like "dead hunted birds" (8).

8. This analysis was Gordon's.

Once in her home, these foundational structures defy fixity. The house shifts and transforms to become, sometimes a dream, sometimes the river, even at times entirely invisible. The distant, recorded voice of the woman speaks:

From then on, my narrow house became a dream. It did. Yes, it really did. A house where everything would shift and change ... I can simply walk through the walls. (De Wet; *The Unspeakable Story*: 1995)

The set design and choreography echo these displacements, these visible and invisible alchemic transformations of space. The walls of the house are painted with Magritte's clouds and later, when the house opens itself to become the river, the clouds are on the floor. The confined space of this home and the intimate duet that it provokes between husband and wife captures the ambiguities, the desperate dependencies and the need for freedom that confronts relationships. As the couple play out their parallel needs for one another, we witness their desire for otherness as they literally drive each other to climbing the walls. The solidity of the floor becomes unable to contain their migrations through each other and the intimacy of their terrifying symbiosis becomes played out against the backdrop of inversion: they support, throw, lift and catch each other onto the walls of their home. As they pace and collide like caged animals, sometimes touching tentatively and tenderly, their desperate attempts to find a stable, grounded meeting place appears hopeless. This duet, like the minimal and repetitive music score, encompasses and assumes a timeless, dream-like quality - a mesmeric repetition of repetitions. The couple know each other's movements so acutely that it is possible for one of them to fall without even being aware that they could catch or that they have been caught. The damp cold of familiarity, of patterns that have lost consciousness are repeated through their movements. Bodies, stories, that have lost

their words and can only communicate intuitively. In *The River*, the woman's voice explains:

I can't live in the water but I live as close to it as I can ... For me the water is not dangerous but the land is something I will never understand. Each step on land is a perilous investigation. I stand at the very edge and I look down at the tall, unfathomable house.

(De Wet; *The Unspeakable Story*: 1995)

The elusive fluidity of water has the creative potential to embrace change, to move, to support her migrations. The design, too, becomes a fluid functionary for the dance - as Gordon has stated, it became important that the design not remain static from beginning to end:

It also moves ... because I think Physical Theatre is dealing with motion, with emotion, with change ... so it is important that the design elements also take the audience on a journey.

(Gordon; Interview: 1995)

The dance itself finds no final dwelling in the specific details of the Magritte story, and migrates in and out of past and present stories about art, dance, the cycles of life and death. Gordon says this movement prevents the Magritte story from becoming a "mere curiosity". He explains that it was "imperative" for him to include the final dance called *The Cycle*, in which a couple in modern dress explore their own relationship. The bricks that they carefully manipulate in their quietly sensuous duet suggest both the subterranean danger and violence that underlies relationships; but in their delicacy with each other the duet also explores the potential for caring and warmth. At one stage in the duet, the male dancer painstakingly carries his lover over his neck, step by step, brick to brick, over an imaginary threshold - to the other side.

The whole point of looking at Magritte, at that particular unspeakable fact, was: "does this have something to say to us as human beings, dealing with relationships, dealing with people, but also dealing in art". (Gordon; Interview: 1995)

His commentary captures an important movement that occurs throughout the work: the fluctuating shifts between the private and the public world. In his book, *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha poetically captures this nomadic postmodern ethos:

To be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the 'unhomely' be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and public spheres. The unhomely moment creeps up on you stealthily as your own shadow *The recesses of the domestic space become sites for history's most intricate invasions.* (Bhabha; 1994 9)

As Bhabha suggests, it is through this displacement, these "invasions", that the borders between "home" and "world" become confused - it is here that the private and public begin impacting upon each. He presents the notion that the "unhomely moment dramatizes" - in the figure of woman - the ambivalent structure of the civil State as it draws its rather paradoxical boundary between the private and the public spheres (Bhabha; 1994 10). To return to the motif of invisibility, it is by making *visible* what Bhabha refers to as the "forgetting of the 'unhomely' moment in civil society" that feminism "specifies" the patriarchal gendered nature of civil society and disturbs the symmetry of private and public:

... which is now shadowed , or uncannily doubled, by the difference of genders which does not neatly map on to the private and public, but becomes disturbingly supplementary to them. This results in redrawing the domestic space as the space of the normalizing, pastoralizing and individuating techniques of modern power and police: the personal is political, the world-in-the-home ... The unhomely moment relates the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctures of political existence. (Bhabha; 1994 11)

In *The Unspeakable Story*, these *unhomely moments* become an integral landscape and focal point that runs throughout the work. The borders between the personal histories of both Magritte and his mother - their "world-in-the-home" - blur with the distinctions of the social, political "home-in-the-world".

Robyn Orlin's work, *In a Corner*, also explores this *unhomely* condition directly. American critic, Robert Greig, suggests the following:

Her work has a confessional air, challenging the conventional barriers between what should be private and what can be public, in much the way Sylvia Plath's poetry and Robert Mapplethorpe's photography do. (Greig; 1994)

Orlin's street woman is living the *traumatic ambivalences* between private and public worlds. What is particularly provocative is the way this woman, through her social alienation and cultural dispossession, loses an identity associated with the archetypes of being *woman*. And yet, in this work, it is exactly through this woman's paradox of being socially and culturally *invisible* in the public world, but still having a vital and *visible* personal world, that identity comes to be questioned. For example, the work initiates and explores a sensuality and an eroticism that seems incongruous with the social image of a down- and- out street vendor. It is here that Orlin really begins to probe beneath the veneers of the public/private binary. Two scenes that capture this ambiguity and tension, are what I have called, the *grape dance* and the *red dance*.

In the *grape dance*, the woman emerges through a hole in the top of the box which has been turned on its side. She has her breasts bared and rises slowly and deliberately out of the hole to meet a bunch of descending green grapes. She plucks the grapes from their bunch, using only her mouth. Her movements are entirely pedestrian and

yet the slowness and sensuality of her gestures transport the movements into an intoxicating and excruciating moment of sensual ecstasy. Orlin suggests that this scene was essentially about a woman being alone and dealing with her sexuality in that aloneness:

That excerpt was about her trying to get back to her own sexuality, but it's a fantasy, an absolute fantasy. (Orlin; Interview: 1995)

As she points out, where would a woman like that find a bunch of grapes in the street?

The red dance, on the other hand, explores more directly, the underbelly of street life. Set to shebeen music, we witness the anger, fear and desperation of this woman's disenchanted world. The woman sips a textured red drink, but with each sip, she takes a tentative step forward, vomiting it all out, and spewing the violent liquid out over her feet. Orlin states that:

The red paint is about a lot of things. It's about the woman being an alcoholic ... she drinks something like skokiaan out of a tin and she vomits up this red paint, this blood ... it raises the whole question of addiction. This woman doesn't know how to deal with a lot of herself, sexuality being part of it. She's homeless, she has no support systems ... she lives for the moment.

(Orlin; Interview: 1995)

The rituals of living in necessity, of having no promise of a homecoming, are played out in this section. The danger, the living on the edge, are all embodied in the brilliant violence of the red that punctuates and resonates both her emotional and physical *unhomeliness*.

Another resonance that emerges with regard to the ambivalences of the public/private spheres, is a question of the public/private in terms of the artist. Having just returned from a five year sojourn in America, it is tempting to draw personal links between Orlin's own

admission of cultural displacement and that of her character. Orlin, however, has emphatically stated that the work is *not* autobiographical:

... there are certain things about that woman that I understand ... loneliness, pain, trying to entertain oneself. So there is a personal story there - I am that woman and she is me. But, let us get Brechtian here, we step aside, I step aside - it's not autobiographical. (Orlin; Interview: 1995)

3.3. Narrative Strategies: Migrations through the Dancescape.

The fact that there are no fixed departures or final destinations throughout both works, breaks strongly with traditional narrative strategies in dance. For at no stage do these women dance their stories, in the traditional sense of the word. This tendency to counter all forms of *rootedness*, truth or fixity with regard to meaning is an essentially postmodern perspective. As Docherty states:

We no longer live in a world organized by the polarity of appearance versus reality ... our world is the world of the simulacrum in which there are only appearances and disappearances and no claim can be made upon any fundamental ontological reality at all. (Docherty; 1990 216)

This polarity between appearance and reality is one which over the centuries has grounded itself securely in the traditions and principles of Western Art. It recollects Aristotle's call for the *suspension of disbelief* - in order to believe the illusion of art as opposed to the *truth* of reality. The history of Western theatre and theatre dance has located this appearance/reality polarity as a central base and archaeology from which to direct and choreograph. In both ballet and contemporary dance forms, there has been a tendency to adhere to the Aristotelian unities of time/place/character. Content and

form can be seen to have followed relatively linear progressions - the narrative and plot structures, design and music all striving for a unified harmony which would reinforce and support the central essence of concept. Symbolism and metaphor similarly serve to deepen and enhance the essence of a work and to contribute to the final containment of meaning. These manifestations are crucially linked to the way knowledge has developed according to, as Docherty calls it, the "Enlightenment's rationality" (Docherty; 1990).

It is at this fundamental level that postmodern dance strategies attempt to resist the master discourses inherited from both classical and modernist dance traditions. Postmodern choreography attempts to deconstruct and interrogate these dance hierarchies.

The way the narrative is dealt with in postmodern projects, is through a process of "seduction" - as Docherty explains:

Seduction ... is not like a stripping naked or a revelation of truth - rather, it is concerned with the play of appearance and disappearance and not a dialectic of appearance and reality.

(Docherty; 1990 21)

As postmodern theorists have suggested, this organising of a work around a "trope of seduction" (Docherty; 1990 15), implies a certain mysticism, or as Baudrillard has stated, it has a "hint of magic" (Rose; 1990). And magic is concerned precisely with appearances and disappearances. As Docherty suggests, the magic short-circuits the narrative:

Narrative operates by establishing and articulating the historical and temporal movements from one state of affairs to another; it is as it were, a temporalized metaphor. But in magic, we see the basic metamorphosis which underpins metaphor, for the simple reason that magic by-passes the normal circuitous routes of narrative and simply shifts from one state to another. (Docherty; 1990 217)

Docherty goes on to explain:

In this, magic is opposed to science and Enlightenment rationality, both of which organise themselves according to the determining instances of a particular version of legitimate narrative ... narrative is answerable and magic is not.

(Docherty; 1990 217)

An analysis of the narrative strategies commanded by both of the works in question reveals the workings of a similar mode of *seduction*. In both works, the audience are invited into a world in which no *legitimate* narrative essence prevails. The thematic concerns are simultaneously structural concerns and the works reject a linear progression of time/space/character unities: rather, the narrative structures seem to evolve through a dream logic: a montage of fragmented, multiple localities and voices. The spatial and temporal structures in both works are fragmented and cyclic and the audience witness how the *fictions* of the stories are pieced together.

Are the stories telling the truth? Are we to believe these representations? The exposure of these women's biographies as fiction, not truth or fact, leaves them open to re-interpretation. Clearly, a number of stories are being told simultaneously: personal stories, public stories. The allusions to theatrical, artistic and dance conventions also makes each work a small narrative on art and artistic traditions.

Orlin's dance employs a circular, dreamtime logic that defies linear progressions. As she points out, however, the cardboard box becomes a through thread:

The box was my narrative, not very linear, but the box was my narrative. (Orlin; Interview: 1995)

In this sense, the anarchic images that slide rapidly into one another are structured within and contained by the movements of the box - it follows a cycle, from being

a closed box at the beginning, then it opens up through its journeys, and at the end it becomes a closed box again. Although one accompanies the woman through seven different transfigurations of her *home*, these episodic shiftings are integrated into the work as a whole. It therefore becomes difficult to say at which point each appearance of a new space emerges or what inspired the urge to change. In this, Orlin is a master at manipulating and questioning temporal and spatial relationships. As Adrienne Sichel says:

Orlin lances space, possesses it, fragments it, colonises and dismantles it. (Sichel; 6 March 1995)

And even more provocatively, she achieves this without ever *dancing*. That there is motion cannot be doubted, but her pedestrian vocabulary certainly defies conventional and traditional expectations of how space should be moved in a dance. That her work is a "dance of the image" becomes confirmed. Each of the kaleidoscopic images which magically appears and disappears to transform one *homely* space into another, is achieved through a process of *seduction*: that is, the *normal circuitous* path of narrative developments are replaced with a montage of fractured and shifting developments that simply, without a logical linearity, become the new state.

In *The Unspeakable Story*, the work is structured into six different episodes: *The Mirror*; *The House*; *The River*; *The Funeral*; *The Dream* and *The Cycle*. Each archetypal episode presents a different view of the *unspeakable fact* of this woman's tragic death. Elizabeth Bronfen, in her book, *Over Her Dead Body* (1992), raises a provocative and critical debate which questions the ways in which death and femininity are culturally positioned as the two central enigmas of Western discourse:

They are used to represent that which is inexpressible, inscrutable, unmanageable, horrible; that which cannot be faced directly but must be controlled by virtue of social laws and art. Death and femininity function as privileged enigmas to be solved yet also defying decipherment in another sense; they *must* not be solved, must be left open, undecided, indeterminate, marking the limit a system sets itself. (Bronfen; 1992 255)

This paradox, of women and death as elusive enigmas - as finally unknowable - follows a logocentric rationale that places both within the realm of mystery. What is intriguing in Gordon's work, however, is that the fragmented and episodic nature of the representations ensures that there is never one solid, dead female body that could be looked at only in one way. Each episode presents an interpretation, a different response to the story. In this way, the assumption of the patriarchal binary is re-presented. As Gordon suggests about the work:

Someone asked me what it's about and I said it's about theatre, about making things in the theatre, and our vehicle was this most challenging narrative. We couldn't assume she didn't like her husband, but what we could do is talk about the theatre in different ways. (Gordon; Interview: 1995)

He goes on to explain that in this sense, the first episode, *The Mirror*, provides the "key" to the work:

It is the mirror, it is reflection, it is distortion, it is many images. There is a mirror on the stage, but there are all these other little actors that have Buckland's image on ... so the mirror is there in many different ways and I think that each episode is another mirror of this woman's death. (Gordon; Interview: 1995)

The first section of the dance, *The Mirror*, explores a nostalgic journey: a mirror of memory into which the audience is swept. A young boy, the young Magritte, is watching his father shave in front of a mirror, while in the shadowy background, the dark figure of a woman,

embroidering is just discernable. Three figures dressed in formal black evening attire with black top hats are standing, motionless, with their backs to the audience. Suddenly the popular 1940's band, The Inkspots, can be heard. They sing their hit: *We Three (My Echo, my Shadow, and Me)*. The three dancers perform a dance reminiscent of a Hollywood entertainment routine, passing and juggling their hats with ease and slick comic timing. Their light and entertaining spectacle is echoed by the tapping of their feet which simulates the movements of tap dancing. As they turn around to join the father, who has been seduced by the fantasy of his own nostalgia and is mouthing the words of the song as he shaves, the audience are confronted with a myriad of reflections of the father's face. The trio are all wearing his mask: or aspects of his persona. These distortions resonate the play on representations: where is the *truth* of his identity, of artistic images? Which image or persona is *real*? In this episode, Gordon has again responded to documented facts about his subject matter. He recalls the story of Magritte's early life:

He lived to read all those cheap detective novels. So the Inkspots helped me put it back in a period - giving the audience a sign of taking them back ... but then to have the actor mouthing the words ... it's what we all do at home when a nice song comes on, you pretend you're the singer, so it was playing with that idea and also playing with Andrew [Buckland] who is a kind of a star. And debunking him slightly, seeing another side of him.

(Gordon; Interview: 1995)

Gordon also cheekily admits that the choice of The Inkspots was about theatre, about changes of style:

People are always saying physical theatre is not really accessible... it's always terribly deep and esoteric. So I thought, alright, we'll use popular music. (Gordon; Interview: 1995)

These examples serve to illustrate the playful and ironic dialogue that the work pursues with theatre and dance traditions.

The River, on the other hand, explores a more expressionistic vocabulary and narrative. In a sense, this river becomes the emotional heartland of the dance - into which the woman plunges her deepest oblivion.

Again, the collaboration of the artistic mediums merge to explore this emotionality. The voice of the text calls the river, "a long, even breath", "an incessant sigh". This relentless motion of the river (and *The River*) and the way it consumes the woman becomes a penetrating sadness that finds companionship in both the music and the choreography.

Composer, Leonhard Praeg, describes the minimal and repetitive quality in the music as a circular movement:

The narrative logic of old music is one of heroism. It's that Hegelian thing of the dialectic. For the listener, moments of sadness and despair are nothing but pitstops along the way of the epic tale. You experience these moments, but it is all sublimated into the end of History ... and Hegel won't say that History is on its way to despair. With music that is circular, it metamorphosizes instead of progresses, you've abandoned that Hegelian project ... the moments become part of the text itself, not just footnotes.

(Praeg; Interview: 1995)

Praeg's reference to the way the music metamorphosizes instead of progressing, parallels Docherty's theories about the way postmodern narratives are concerned with the play of appearance/disappearance - rather than with a Hegelian dialectic that sets up a binary opposition between appearance and reality. Praeg goes on to suggest that the repetitions of the music "confine" the listener, that they limit the listener "to that circle in which sadness is the whole world". He develops this argument

when he says that this sadness is not a sadness for "deliverance":

It's for now, it's a very real sadness and it's all there is ... the origin is forever obscured and there is no goal, no place where the river runs into the sea, because that is deliverance. (Praeg; Interview: 1995)

Musicologist, Jacques Attali, has suggested that composers like Debussy and Stravinsky (both of whom collaborated with dance practitioners - The *Ballets Russes*), made it possible to compose without any firm or stable grounding key and to abandon an explicitly narrative progression in composition. Attali says of postmodern trends in music:

Music is becoming composition. Representation against fear, repetition against harmony, composition against normality. It is the interplay of concepts that music invites us to enter.
(Attali in Docherty: 1990 195)

Praeg's music thus serves, in a similar way, to *unground* the work: its driving repetitions and surging circular energy has no final departure or arrival. It is, like the river/*River*, an "incessant sigh".

The Funeral explores a more grotesque and macabre interpretation of the narrative: it looks at the isolation and loneliness of the splits and fractures between the personal and public woman. As Gordon notes:

... it seemed that no-one worried about her, spoke about her ... the mourners arrived, more concerned with who was there and what they looked like ... like a fashion show. It was incidental to them whose body it was. (Gordon; Interview: 1995)

In this episode, Gordon draws on his theatrical experience to scrutinize the disjunctures between the public and the personal captured in this lamentable funeral. By the end of this scenario, the audience have

witnessed a duet, performed with the speed and power play of Latin American dance styles like the tango and "dirty dancing"; a macabre fashion parade; a vaudeville act and a singer's floorshow: each being stylistically different.

For example, the comic relief in the vaudeville is brought by the clowning antics and dialogue of two workers, who, on collecting the woman's dead body, complain about the "terrible pong" of "floaters". Gordon's postmodern playfulness reveals itself through this allusion to theatrical traditions. As Gordon suggests:

It's almost traditional Shakespeare ... the porter in *MacBeth* or the gravedigger in *Hamlet*.

(Gordon; Interview: 1995)

Another example, is his use and combination of the popular contemporary music of Via Condias (*Forever Blue*), his use of popular Latin American dance styles and the theatrical idiom of cabaret. Gordon suggests that working in popular idioms provided a challenge:

... I wanted to see if through that, and through quite a cliched representation of the man beating up the woman, we could also arrive at some understanding? (Gordon; Interview: 1995)

This eclecticism, within a single episode, enables the work to sustain its questioning through a range of historical and temporal contexts - the specific concern with Magritte's mother is able to resonate and spill over into other areas of social and political life. The questioning becomes a more universal probing into the tensions between the public and private realms of human relationships and institutional structures like marriage, and how they affect women.

The Dream, on the other hand, ushers the audience into a surreal landscape - the world of the unconscious, of dreaming. In this dance, the small boy walks over to a

black-and-white filmic image of his mother's face and tries to access her memory through touching the screen. The image is so close-up that a sense of proportion is entirely lost: the difference between a grainy texture and an eye, for example, becomes remote. This distortion and obscurity is echoed in the text:

Woman: He would awaken, always in the dark - with the intense fear that the furniture, the objects, the room itself had become unfamiliar and menacing.
(De Wet; *The Unspeakable Story*: 1995)

This dreaming up of his mother's visage assumes a surreal logic which is heightened when a host of ghostly women with masks on, enter, one by one, and *dance* him away from the film image. The lighting in this scene utilises a strobe effect which further distorts linearity and contributes to the sense of *unfamiliarity* and *menace*. As Gordon suggests, this image of the mother's myriad reflections:

... appeared as this quite frightening dream for the little boy ... she was there over and over again.
(Gordon; Interview: 1995)

Clearly then, each small narrative or story, represents a different reading of the of this woman's death. She is not danced by only one performer: it is almost as if every dancer bears some aspect of this woman, or that this woman represents, in some small resonance, an aspect of any woman. As Gordon suggests, in *The Cycle*, she was "all of them in a way", the dancers were "another myriad of representations of that woman" (Gordon: 1995).

Through the above analyses of the cyclic or dream logic of the narrative structures operating in both works, it becomes apparent that postmodern strategies are being employed. Dance theorist, Ana Sanchez-Colberg, suggests that these "poetic structures" of postmodern techniques transgress the rules/codes of linguistics and morality, aiming not at specific signification, but rather at

generating an "accumulation of meanings" which relativise and contradict one another. (Sanchez-Colberg; 1993 161)
In both works, this accumulation becomes evident.

3.4. The Dance Vocabularies: Reclaiming The Body's Subjectivity.

Louis McNay, in a discussion of Foucault and Feminism, expresses the following idea;

There is a discrepancy and slippage between 'woman' as representation and women as historical beings and as subjects of real relations, of which gender is a primary, but not the only relation ... we need to analyse power from the mechanisms of domination, but also from a level of the 'microphysics' of power.
(McNay; 1993 46)

In the works of both choreographers the bodies that we encounter are not "docile" bodies (9): women are not portrayed only as victims and objects, and men only as symbols of power and domination. The training and creative choreographic processes employed by both choreographers appears to rely on the experiences and personalities of the performers: through creative improvisation and the focus on contact work, in Gordon's case. The performers' own idiosyncratic physicalities are explored and expressed and in this way, the *microphysics* of power, the nuances and contradictions of personal responses to patriarchy are exposed. This is achieved, I believe, largely in the *different* ways that bodies and physicality are creatively explored and revealed. Gordon hints at this when he comments that:

9. This is a reference to an article by Foucault called *Docile Bodies* (Rabinow; 1984 179 - 187). In this article, Foucault analyses the changing image of the figure of the soldier in the 19th century. Through this example, he illustrates the way that discipline acts on the body, to produce "subjected and practised bodies", "docile bodies". His central thesis is that a "political anatomy", which is also a "mechanics of power", was birthed in the 19th century.

He aims to educate performers, rather than merely train bodies: 'And when you have performers who can be both creative and critical, then you will have exciting performances'. (Handley; 1995 55)

Orlin's work is notorious for its confrontational displacement of gender stereotyping. In an interview, Orlin was asked whether this was a deliberate focus of her aesthetic. Her response cited an example of a recent work she created for the Johannesburg Dance Foundation, in which there was an ironic twist in the way the audience responded to her use of gender stereotyping:

The work was about the Ebola virus, about how cheap life is in Africa. I used one white woman and four black men, mainly because that is what the company was comprised of. I used that, and I put them in very stereotypic ways, which contrasted what I normally do, and in doing that I set off major catastrophes. The audience was really outraged. I thought I was just trying to find a different way of working with deconstruction. So there you go, I obviously do it deliberately.

(Orlin; Interview: 1995)

In a Corner, on the other hand, disturbs the expectations of traditional dance vocabularies. Throughout this work, Orlin is never seen to make one *dance* move or step. The vocabulary is entirely pedestrian and functional. The *mosquito dance* comes the closest to *movement* and only in the oblique way that it parodies the waltz. Orlin's music score for this particular section is Strauss' *Blue Danube*. The street woman has laid her box out flat on the floor and goes to sleep. Shortly thereafter, she is assuaged by a mosquito. She leaps up and flaps about, in and out of time with the music, in a desperate attempt to kill the plaguing beast. A comic and playful, yet very real, scenario of African night. And a wry and humorous reference to an *African* waltz.

In this work, there is not a moment of virtuosic or spectacular movement. It almost recalls American

choreographer Yvonne Rainer's famous dance manifesto for the 1960's in America:

No to spectacle no to virtuosity ... no to moving or being moved. (Cohen; 1982 235)

Orlin, it seems, feels no obligation to perfect or formulate a distinctive style of vocabulary. She suggests in an interview that she has become fascinated with the way the dancers in classical ballet defy gravity, and that she would like to do a piece "with that defiance, in a very confrontational way" (Orlin; Interview: 1995). She says of her working method:

I come to each new work in a very different space. I always create rules that I want to break, I make the rules and then I break them. That's my method of work. Sometimes it comes out in the form of a dance vocabulary, sometimes it comes out in the form of a visual vocabulary. It's very difficult to say what the Orlin stamp is. (Orlin; Interview: 1995)

In true postmodern style, her aesthetic is able to draw eclectically from, and engage with, any dance tradition.

A close examination of the movement and dance vocabulary that The First Physical Theatre Company employs and explores, reveals a subversion of the *official* ideal of the dancing body. For one, the ages of the performers has ranged from 18 to 75 years of age (10), contesting the dominant expectation of the dancing body as young, nubile and mobile. Furthermore, there is often no distinction between the vocabulary of the male and female dancers: both genders are capable of an athletic flexibility and strength, both are seasoned in the art of lifting and catching.

10. In a work entitled, *They Were Caught Waiting* (1993), choreographer, Gary Gordon, explores the way time is spent "waiting" for our inevitable deaths. One of the performers in this work is a woman who is 75 years of age.

In the company's work, this deviation from gender role stereotyping, and the plurality of bodies that are witnessed, throws into question the rigid gender roles we assume are inevitable. As dance theorist, Colberg, suggests, when aspects of the marginalised body, the hidden/unconscious/repressed, are brought onto centre stage, aspects of the "oppressed feminine" are also exposed (Sanchez-Colberg; 1993 158). I would argue that the dance vocabularies and collaborative processes of choreographic creation explored by the company, reclaim an *oppressed* feminine principle.

Initially, this argument could be construed as contradictory, in the light of the strong male agenda that the company promotes. Many of the company's works have explicitly explored the politics of masculinity: works like *Catacoomb II* (1992) by P.J.Sabbagha; and *Dialogue* (1993), a collaboration by Buckland/Gordon and De Wet; serve as two examples that deal with male relationships. The images of the male body in these works rebuke and expose the way male sexualities have been repressed, both socially and in dance. One may then enquire: how can this male agenda aid a deconstruction of the female dancing body? I would argue that if the male body is seen to be not only strong and dominant, but at times, vulnerable (being lifted, carried, supported), the binary opposition of male/female is simultaneously displaced since this structure requires its opposition. At the same time this context also generates other questions. For instance, when questioned about the possibility of *collapsing* gender particularities if gender vocabularies are the same, Gordon astutely retaliates:

I'm not going for androgeny ... The other thing is that our women are quite strong, physically strong, so they are capable of doing quite difficult, impressive supporting and lifting of the male dancers which is usually not shown. I think we are very interested in less traditional ways of partnering. (Gordon; Interview: 1995)

While many of the company's other works have explored thematic concerns that openly allowed a questioning of traditional roles (11), in *The Unspeakable Story*, the narrative has demanded that traditional gender roles be explored. Gordon alludes to this:

I needed to have men and women to tell the story ... husband and wife ... but I don't think I denied Andrew his maleness or Samantha her femininity ... but I think they are not traditional ... I respond to that kind of male and femaleness in them and so I tend to draw that out. That might be how many people perceive that the distinction is not so clear. I do think that perhaps in us as people the distinction is being pushed too much ... and I don't think that distinction is interesting.

(Gordon; Interview: 1995)

By subverting traditional, mainstream dance representations of gender identities, both choreographers explore a feminine politics. But more than just challenging the *ideal* image of the dancing body, the works provide a vision and method for realising creative alternatives to patriarchal *forms*. As Sanchez-Colberg enquires:

Poetic analogy becomes a political alternative?

(Sanchez-Colberg; 1993 161)

These two works appear to demonstrate the unfolding of a postmodern politics. Recalling arguments presented in Chapters One and Two, these two works become political in their postmodernity precisely because the choreographic strategies explored are concerned less with the production of identity than with the *seduction of difference*. In this way, the works inspire a postmodern

11. In a work like *Shattered Windows* (1989), for example, both the men and women wear dishevelled, disintegrating dresses. In this particular work, what were once closed gender signifiers (a dress is worn by a woman), are opened and gender clichés in terms of costuming are "shattered". A work like *Dialogue* (1993), on the other hand, explores a relationship between two gay men, once again, exploding the dance taboo on "appropriate" thematic material.

dance practice that can contest patriarchal representations beyond the purely academic and linguistic.

CONCLUSION

One of the central concerns of this mini-thesis has been to explore the potential that postmodern discourses could have in providing new models for understanding dance in South Africa. If "the postmodern's initial concern is to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life ... to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as 'natural' ... are in fact 'cultural' " (Huthcheon; 1989 2), then the body politics of postmodernism illuminate the extent to which embodiment is such a cultural construct. Deconstructive readings displace and reveal the *invisible* notions of neutrality and *naturalness* that structure monolithic universals like truth, identity, gender, commonality and nationhood.

The deconstructive choreographic strategies employed by Gordon and Orlin appear to de-naturalise official representations of the dancing body, thus recollecting a feminine principle that restores to the dancing body a creative subjectivity. Because of the way these works manage to embrace difference, they offer a possible *vision* for accommodating aspects of diversity and plurality without collapsing these into politically correct notions of *sameness*. In this way they bear witness to the diversity that will always structure and guide expressions of commonality in South African dance.

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4. INTERVIEWS:

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3. Jeanette Ginslov: July 1995: General interview about dance in South Africa and also about her work.
4. Balu Searl: April 1994: Interview about the development and demise of the dance company, Southern Women.
5. Robyn Orlin: November 1995: Interview about In a corner the sky surrenders and also about dance in South Africa and internationally.
6. Leohnard Praeg: October 1995: Interview about the musical score for The Unspeakable Story.

5. VIDEO RECORDINGS:

1. A BBC interview with British choreographer, Lloyd Newson, Date Unknown.
2. An interview with South African dance critic, Adrienne Sichel. This interview was conducted and filmed by Lanon Prigge at the 1995 FNB Vita Dance Umbrella.

3. Video recordings of *The Unspeakable Story*: rehearsals (June: 1995) and performances (1995 Standard Bank Schools' Festival; The 1995 Grahamstown National Festival of the Arts).

6. PROGRAMME NOTES:

1. Gary Gordon's Manifesto (1994)
2. Gary Gordon's Declarations (1995)