

RHODES UNIVERSITY

MOTION ARRESTED : BODY POLITICS
AND THE STRUGGLE FOR A PHYSICAL THEATRE

Inaugural lecture delivered at

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by

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BA(Hons) (Natal) MA (CNAAB Great Britain)

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Mr Vice-Chancellor, distinguished guests, colleagues and friends:

I remember when I returned recently from London and my lectureship at the Laban Centre for Movement and Dance, a perplexed friend within the university enquired -

"How on earth could you come back to Grahamstown? ... From London?"

There are too many issues to discuss in attempting a rationalisation of my actions, but I can answer honestly now and say, "I'm glad I did".

I came back with a mission and a commitment to further arts education and in particular drama and dance. This is not something that hit me one day - it has accrued over many years and I feel I must thank my family first for their unswerving belief in my career choice. Drama, I'm sure many of you will agree, is often not seen as an appropriate choice for a young man, but throughout my university career my family were firm supporters.

At university, my two movement lecturers, Dr Fred Hagemann and Ms Jilian Hurst encouraged me in the area of movement and dance and introduced me to the principles of movement advocated by Rudolph Laban. I think it was this that finally persuaded me to attend the Laban Centre where I met Dr Bonnie Bird and Mr Paul Filmer. Bonnie Bird had worked with Martha Graham during the early days of modern dance in America and later her first student had been Merce Cunningham. It was through her that I began to appreciate the art of making dances. Paul Filmer in his "Sociology of Dance" option provided me with the knowledge that dance wasn't all aesthetic appreciation - the dialogue with society was also pivotal! I am indebted to all my colleagues at the Laban Centre as it was through them that I experienced the diversity of dance. In particular, I would like to thank my colleague Clare Baker who is at present here in Grahamstown conducting a residency in the department.

It is with great pride that I acknowledge the contribution of my present staff, Jane Osborne, who should be reading this lecture, Andrew Buckland, Reza de Wet, Lindy Roberts, David Alcock and Michael Carlin. I am fully aware of their support and I cannot neglect to mention Professor Beth Dickerson whose warmth and advice encouraged me when I accepted this post. I would also like to mention Mr Ken Robinson, who during my "salad days" was a constant source of inspiration.

I feel I must also look back and acknowledge the greatness of Professor Guy Butlers vision in establishing a Department of Speech and Drama,- to Professor Michael Whisson who fought for the department during that frightening time of rationalisation and to Professor Macdonald who has always been available for the "new professor down the road". I am also extremely appreciative of the support given by Dr Henderson and Dr Smout to the Department of Drama and The First Physical Theatre Company.

And to all the students in the department who constantly challenge and inspire me and with whom I develop as an academic, educator and artist.

And finally to my wondrous secretary Jo Melton Butler who has helped me through the preparation pains of this inaugural lecture and to Calum Stevenson for his patience and support.

MOTION ARRESTED:

Body Politics and the Struggle for a Physical
Theatre.

THE BEGINNING

One of the many pieces of advice given to a public speaker is to have a good, strong beginning. In fact, this advice filters down to most art forms. I remember at a Dance Concert presented by the Napac Dance Company in Durban last year, a concert entitled New Directions, when an enraged member of the audience advanced on me and complained - "The trouble with all this avant garde work is that there is no beginning, middle or end".

I was silenced ... what could I say? ... in fact, he was right... but on the other hand ... the objective of all this avant garde work was to eschew any obvious beginnings, middles and endings. The inevitable questioning of our time and space reared its unnerving head: were there indeed any clear beginnings, middles or endings? Samuel Beckett had struggled with that notion in Waiting For Godot (1956) where endings, middles, beginnings merged into one relentless and confusing cycle.

Pozzo: [suddenly furious]. Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! It's abominable! When! When! One day, is that not enough for you, one day like any other day, one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we'll go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you? [Calmer.] They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more. [He jerks the rope.] On! [Beckett: 1990, 89]

So rather than attempt a rousing beginning, I shall start with the beginning or at least soon after the alleged beginning.

"Then the eyes of both of them were opened and they knew that they were naked, and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves coverings."

MOTION ARRESTED

This enables me to focus the argument of this paper on the body - its perception by the social body and interaction with the political body. The book of Genesis articulates clearly the debilitating aspect of the body compared to the "higher" spiritual moral order. A presiding principle becomes evident in complex western industrial societies and that is of the denial of the body. This denial of the body identifies a social obligation and one that demands the arresting, the curtailing and the manipulation of the individual body. What is finally revealed is an intense dialogue between the political body and the individual body. Mary Douglas (1970) in her comparative study of religions is particularly helpful on this point.

The social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived. The physical experience of the body ... sustains a particular view of society. There is a continual exchange of meanings between the two kinds of bodily experience so that each reinforces the categories of the other. As a result of this interaction the body itself is a highly restricted medium of expression. [Douglas: 1970,65]

This idea then, that the motion of the body is arrested is a social fact and one that is of particular interest to theatre artists where body culture and the

training of the body is pivotal in the signification of ideas and communication of content and meaning. This centrality of the body in performance training cannot be over stressed. Grotowski, the Polish director, in his demand for a "poor theatre" urges his actors to work on the body "first" in order to achieve intensity and integrity of emotion, voice, mind and spirit [Grotowski: 1969, 161], It is this same commitment to training that appealed to the creators and performers of Woza Albert! in South Africa. The body has always been of central concern within the theatre.

Modern interest in the body's expressive and symbolic resources has been strongest in the dance world, but also recurs in the cinematic tradition of Eisenstein and the theatrical tradition of Artaud and Grotowski.

[Benthall: 1972, 5]

The power to communicate through the body is fully realised in Lloyd Newson's work with his company DV8 Physical Theatre. In this short extract from *Strange Fish* (1992), we can appreciate how the body provides information concerning character-type and interpersonal relations.

VIDEO INSERT

The point I would like to pursue now is the arresting of motion - a point given theatrical realisation in A Doll's House (1879) written by the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, Torvald Helmer epitomises the aspirations of the bourgeois class with his insistence on order, morality, duty and obligation. He is outraged by his doll-wife's performance of an abandoned and wild tarantella.

NORA: [dancing] See what fun we are having, Kristine.

HELMER: But my dear darling Nora, you are dancing as though your life depended on it.

NORA: It does.

HELMER: Stop, Rank! This is sheer madness. Stop I say.
[RANK stops playing and NORA comes to a sudden halt.]

HELMER: [crosses to her] I would never have believed it. You

have forgotten everything I have taught you.

[Macfarlane translation: 1981, 59]

This performance is symbolic of her emotional turmoil and displays her rejection of a dominating husband and her function as "doll" wife and "doll" mother. We learn that Nora's personal odyssey is about to begin. Another example serves to locate this notion of controlling the subversive body within the context of southern Africa. Erlmann (1991) comments on a programme launched by the National Education Department in 1948 which investigated the "preservation of African music and dancing".

The department... formulated the need for an "adaptation of African dancing to conform with the ideals of Christian civilization". With the view to "produce citizens who are socially adaptable, self disciplined, physically fit and well developed," department officials ... encouraged "less suggestive Native dances".

[Erlmann: 1991, pp 110- 111]

It is the words "forgotten everything I have taught you" from Torvald Helmer and "conforming" from the South African officials that relates to the notion of arresting the body. A glaring fact is emerging and that is of the social construction of the body and the consequent arresting of motion. I would like to refer to another example: the female body has been subjected to extreme forms of violation, decoration and control in the name of aesthetics and this intervention has dominated much contemporary criticism. Adair (1992) presents the viewpoint that the presentation and behavioural patterns of the female body are a social construct and that this is embedded in dance training and the presentations of women on the stage.

As the body is central to dance training and practice, recognition that that which is socially constructed can be deconstructed offers a challenge to traditional practices. Deconstruction of the representations of women in dance enables rejection of restrictive, offensive images of women ...

[Adair: 1992, 199]

A DIALOGUE: ART AND SOCIETY

These examples drawn from diverse geographical, temporal and artistic contexts, display the link between conformity and the social construction of the body. I would like to comment briefly on my approach in this paper. It should be evident from the discussion so far that the nature of this discourse will be an eclectic one - an examination of body language will be addressed both informally, through its significance for mundane social interaction in social studies and also formally through its encoded presentation in dance and drama. In this section viewed from Lloyd Newson's *Strange Fish*, it was possible to see this informal and formal presentation. The sequence begins with mundane bodily behaviour and moves towards a formal presentation through dance. Newson's first degree was in psychology and his later commitment to physical theatre draws these two approaches together.

What gives this two pronged approach validity is the constant dialogue between the artist and her or his society. Judith Hanna, dance anthropologist maintains that whether the intention of the artist is to "mirror" or "refract" the social and cultural system, the artist is working at a critical level of investigation in that new symbols are evolved for the communication of the social order. In this reflexive relationship between art and society the artist is evoking through contemporary images and symbols, a condition of society that distinguishes it from previous representations and manifestations. Coplan (1985) in his work on performance art amongst black South Africans comments on "the impossibility of separating performance from social action" [Coplan: 1985, 4], Blacking, the social anthropologist, in his account of the Venda girls' initiation cycle provides another example of this connection -

The most important lesson of domba and of the other initiation schools was the instruction about the institutions and responsibilities of motherhood, fatherhood, and marriage.

[Blacking: 1956-8, 86]

The fact then that society holds the view that the body is "subversive" will require illustrations drawn not only from social studies, but also from dance and drama thereby affirming this dialogue between society and art.

MARGINALISATION OF THE BODY

It is appropriate now to examine the control of the body from the perspective of society. A productive body within a capitalist system is acceptable, other

behaviour is perceived as unnecessary, unimportant, perfunctory and sometimes even counter-productive. Kumar's work Prophecy and Progress (1978) presents an analysis of the emergence of contemporary western societies. The key issue is that of industrialisation and this marked a significant and critical transformation from simple feudal societies to complex industrial societies. Some of the prime movers in this process of industrialisation were seen as contributing to "the general advancement in scientific methodology, or specific technological inventions" (Kumar: 1978,55). From the beginning of sociological enquiry into the systematic nature of socio-cultural order, it was suggested that the sciences provided the paradigm for knowledge. Typically in such a conception of the order of society those attributes that appear to contradict the achievements of the mind, the intellect and the sciences, that is the body, the emotions and the arts, become of marginal status and a minority preoccupation. This is still reflected in educational and training programmes - the arts receive minimal attention. It should not come as a surprise then that the social body is clearly doubtful of the merits of engaging in arts particularly those related to the body. Raymond Williams (1981) makes the first point clear in his introduction to Culture

The sociology of culture is seen as a doubtful area. In ordinary lists in the fields of sociology it gets in, if at all, as a very late entry.

[Williams: 1981, 9]

Williams wrote this in 1981 - the marginalisation of the body and consequently dance is still a social, political and educational fact. Dance is a minority preoccupation - Peter Brinson, an international dance scholar, in his recent keynote address in Durban emphasised this point.

Dance is the most potent example of marginalisation of all the arts - in funding, in tertiary training and education, in the school curriculum and in the attitudes and priorities of politicians and senior administrators, locally and nationally.

[Brinson: 1993, 4]

Given the fact that South Africa has a rich cultural heritage it is important to acknowledge that "in funding, tertiary training and education" the arts have occupied, historically, marginal status. The resolutions adopted at the National Arts Initiative in Durban last year, stress this fact.

RESOLUTION 10

ARTS EDUCATION: PRE-PRIMARY, PRIMARY AND SECONDARY LEVELS

Noting

- a. the deficit view of arts education and that most children have never had or do not have any form of arts education

[NAL 1993, 13]

That the arts will still be marginalised in the New South Africa is a concern of many arts practitioners and educators. Mike van Graan, General Secretary of the National Arts Coalition and Senior Advisor to the Government on Arts and Culture spoke to this concern. He recently addressed scholars at the National Schools'

Festival in Grahamstown. His comments on the state of the arts is particularly illuminating:

And when chance ... determined that the IFP should get two ministerial portfolios including arts and culture, the concern that the new government did not take the arts seriously, was exacerbated ... Linking arts and culture to science and technology raised the further concern that the ministry would spend most of its resources on projects on sending people to the moon, rather than on constantly developing and celebrating our cultural heritage.

[Van Graan: 1994, 1]

What is pertinent to this discussion of marginality is the possible alteration of this status with the new educational strategies. The ANC and Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) are proposing the implementation of a core course for young scholars: a "combined arts" programme as part of the General Education Certificate. Let us look to the future then for a possible time when every South African citizen has a right to an Arts Education. My present concern about the marginality of the arts will then have to be revised or at the worst updated!

POLARITY

Now that I am almost at the middle, it is probably time to refer back to my

point soon after the beginning. The problem with the body is the implied opposite: the mind. The constructions of language set up a polarity between "mind" and "body" that is not quite as clear in the "lived" experience of being-in-the-world. As an individual I feel, think, speak and move - possibly one of these aspects is more developed but they are all always present. At the centre of the debate on marginality lies this distinct polarity between the mind and the body,- between logos and eros. This introduces another issue: the linking of the sciences and the intellect with the masculine principle thereby establishing a consequent polarity and simultaneously, the marginality of the arts, the emotions and the feminine principle.

Julia Kristeva refers to this condition as "logocentric rationality" - a condition that is embedded in western civilisation

[Benthall: 1972, 6],

It is this obsession with "logocentric rationality" that undermines the potential of the arts and in particular those arts related to the body. The post-structuralist, Jacques Derrida, is also helpful on this point. In his deconstruction of western philosophy, he postulates a series of oppositions that have reinforced this notion of polarity.

Man	Woman
Speech	Writing
Presence	Absence
Reason	Imagination
Work	Play
Origin	Derivation
Author	Reader
Host	Parasite
Central	Peripheral
Meaning	Language
Soul	Body
Inside	Outside
Essence	Structure
Truth	Rhetoric
Philosophy	Literature

Crudely speaking, it has been deconstruction's task to demonstrate that Western philosophy has systematically attempted to characterize

the ideas in the second column as inferior to, or derivative from, and secondary to, the first column [Aravamudan in Pylkk_nen: 1989, 240].

In such a view, it should not come as a surprise that the arts are of marginal status and a minority preoccupation and that the less verbal arts are even further down the hierarchical ladder. Benthall (1972) points out that minimal serious research has been conducted in the field of non-verbal communication as compared to the rigorous attention given to verbal language. He argues later that this is due to the fact that "... verbal language is widely and influentially regarded as the distinctively human capability"

[Benthall: 1972, 6],

SOME BACKGROUND

I would like at this stage to provide further examples of what Kristeva refers to as "logocentric rationality". What I hope to demonstrate in these examples is that this denial of the body is firmly embedded in the western heritage and culture. I began at the beginning with the Book of Genesis but would now like to look at one of the early Greek philosophers.

The notion that the body was capable of subverting the moral order was reinforced by Plato in his vision of the ideal Republic. In his account of mimesis he is intolerant of "imitators" -

... if they imitate at all, they should imitate from youth upward only those characters which are suitable to their profession - the courageous, temperate, holy, free, and the like, but they should not depict or be skilful at imitating any kind of illiberality or baseness lest from imitation they should come to be what they imitate.

[Hofstadter& Kuhns (ed): 1964, 20]

The idea that bodily expression might constitute a threat to the social order and sensibility seems to have engendered a conservative bias. This study is not only confined to the past - Goffman (1971), in his study of interpersonal relationships, illustrates that learned bodily behaviour is imperative in either maintaining or reacting against existing behavioural patterns.

... it is not possible to imagine a society that does not make extensive use of various sets of ground rules

[Goffman: 1971, 30]

Coffman suggests further that throughout the history of western civilisation, the Christian doctrine has played an important role in establishing the official moral ideology regarding the proper conduct between males and females [Coffman: 1971, 184]. Both these writings, the one from Plato and the other from Goffman, identify the potential of the body for subverting the moral order. I would not be so bold as to offer an interpretation of sections from The Bible but I would like to refer to Brown's commentary concerning St Augustine's interpretation of Paradise.

It involved physical intercourse, child birth and the rearing of children. Adam and Eve's original state, even implied a measure of hierarchy. Augustine ... validated the rule of men over women and the rule of the father over his children as part of God's original order. [Brown: 1988, 400]

This argument affirms the world view of a privileged young man during the Roman empire in the second century AD. Brown asserts that this young gentleman viewed his position from "unchallenged dominance" and that this hierarchy was based upon nature itself. This example again substantiates Kristeva's claim of "logocentric rationality".

Biologically, the doctors said, males were those fetuses who realised their full potential. They had amassed a decisive surplus of "heat" ... in the early stages of their coagulation in the womb ... women, by contrast, were failed males ...

[Brown: 1988, 10]

I would like to illustrate this notion of the denial of the body by showing a short extract from PJ Sabbagha's work Catacomb II. Sabbagha created this work for The First Physical Theatre Company in 1993. Observe the movement of the group, their distress displayed by an athleticism that is indicative of their emotional turmoil. The closing image of the collapsed and bandaged bodies provides an effective metaphor.

VIDEO INSERT

REBELLION OF THE BODY

Many studies document this enforced relationship and identify patriarchal dominance, rational supremacy and scientific advancement. What I would like to review is how deviations to or subversions of the social norm are displayed. It should come as no surprise that the breaking of these "ground rules", as Goffman calls them, constitute a threat to social order and that these "breaks" are displayed often through "disruptive" bodily behaviour. The reaction of the adolescent girls in Salem (1692) to the repressive dogma of the Puritan ethic was expressed in what appeared to the Puritan authorities as uncontrolled and licentious "dancing". The body as God's "temple" became the topic for enquiry in Oscar Wilde's A Woman of No Importance (1893) and George Bernard Shaw's Mrs Warren's Profession (1894). Both playwrights exposed the hypocrisy that underpinned nineteenth century Victorian morality - great discrepancies emerged between public morality and private actions.

O'Neill (1972) writes of the "non-verbal rhetoric" of political dissidence. He maintains that since society uses words as its primary means of social control, all repressed groups will tend to find their most effective expression through the body. He presents three clear test-cases,- blacks, male homosexuals and the deaf. Goffman comments on American urban life in the 1960s and the disruptive element is identified clearly by a body culture. He describes this culture as follows -

... the current unsafety and incivility of our city streets, the new political device of intentionally breaking the ground rules for self-expression during meetings and contacts, the change in rules of censorship, and the social molestation encouraged in the various forms of encounter groups' and experimental theatre.

[Goffman: 1971, ppix - x]

Here in South Africa another voice is sounded - the voice of the dissenting body is expressed through the toyi-toyi; a moving body of song and dance that often elicits reactions of fear and distrust in observers. The constructive nature of this action is seldom accredited - the fact that possible violent action is given a creative, expressive and physical outlet.

This is where I would like to make a connection between body politics and performance. Many of the "modern" exponents of dance and theatre made a cry for a live, immediate theatre of action. Action that was significant, simple but always relevant. The revolution of Isadora Duncan, one of the early modern dance pioneers, was not merely an artistic one. She threw off her dancing shoes and her corset and danced in diaphanous and transparent garments with a body that was clearly not sylph-like (and once or twice even pregnant!) A militant gesture against the bourgeois depiction of women - here was an entire political and artistic agenda. She placed this new emancipated American woman at the forefront of the New World.

The dancer of the future will be one whose body and soul have grown so harmoniously together that the natural language of that soul will have become the movement of the body...From all parts of her body shall shine radiant intelligence, bringing to the world the message of the thoughts and aspirations of thousands of women. She shall dance the freedom of woman ...

[Cohen (ed): 1977, 129]

In this essay written in 1902, Duncan attempts to dispel the polarity between soul, body, intelligence and women. A grave danger of current theatre scholarship is to "intellectualise" the contribution of these early innovators. There is a tendency to acknowledge their artistic ideas and to minimise their commitment to social and political change. It is imperative to acknowledge the passionate commitment of these early innovators. Their artistic ideologies impacted on their interpersonal relationships and life styles. A point made clear in Vanessa Redgrave's recent portrayal of Isadora Duncan in Martin Sherman's When She Danced.

Antonin Artaud's The Theatre and its Double was first published in Paris in 1938. This First Manifesto for a Theatre of Cruelty was a cry against traditional theatre forms and established conventions. He believed that there was no longer any need for a reliance on texts, psychological analysis and plot. Theatre of Cruelty was an assault on accepted values and simultaneously a redefinition of the role of drama,- a return to what Artaud believed was the "primitive". Rational language was dismissed - in its place an assemblage of sounds, pre verbal language production, stylised movements and evocative gesture. His writings on emotional gesture have had a long term impact on subsequent theatre innovators.

... instead of harking back to texts regarded as sacred and definitive, we must first break theatre's objection to the text and rediscover the idea of a kind of unique language somewhere between gesture and thought. Artaud: The Theatre of Cruelty - First Manifesto.[Schumacher: 1991, 100]

It is an outburst such as this that identifies one of the first cries for a "physical" theatre. It is worth noting that in cultures where it is assumed that the body blossoms, it is also argued that there are a great many restrictions placed upon bodily behaviour and bodily expression. One of the early Butoh Theatre dancers in Japan, Tatsumi Hijikata, is vehement in his attack on attitudes of the body. His work, *Rebellion of the Body* (1968) is a protest at the rape of the individual body by the ordering nature of the social body. There are numerous dances in southern Africa in which sexual identity is a central factor - dances for men and dances for women. The problem here again centres on the social construction of the body: the appropriation and control of women's bodies forcing them into specific roles of "wife" and "mother". Lulu Khumalo created *Africance* last year - a work created for The First Physical Theatre Company. In this work, she playfully altered stereotypical gender roles: a white woman is engaged in black urban dance forms - traditionally the domain of the male black dancer.

Theatre artists such as Duncan, Artaud and Hijikata understand how the body can subvert and comment on the status quo. Other artists whose creative endeavours are embedded in expressionism, like Mary Wigman and Martha Graham, have also had an indirect impact on the growth towards a "physical" theatre. It is from both dance and drama innovators that we can trace this growth towards physical theatre. In recent times, the European dance theatre scene is alive with many companies protesting at traditional morality and its attitudes towards gender and sexuality - Pina Bausch with her Wuppertal Tanztheater, Lloyd Newson with his *DV 8 Physical Theatre*, Wim Vandekeybus and Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker. Sophie Constanti (1992) comments on Pina Bausch's vision -

Bausch's performers have always made an art out of the details of inappropriate attire or behaviour ... Bausch creates a world in which men and women are instructed not to listen to the inner voice of reason, the voice which, if nothing else, tells one to behave.

[Constanti: 1992, 10]

RE-ENTER THE BODY

An alarming concern in present day attitudes is the reaction that bodily expression, whether on the streets or on the stage, threatens the social, political and moral order. This reaction should not be regarded only as a conservative one but one in which the participants are "being forced to appreciate all the uses they had made of the prior order and all the dependency they had developed on it" [Goffman 1971, xii - xiii].

This intense commitment for change is the cornerstone of Lloyd Newson's DV8 Physical Theatre; in fact I would refer to his work as "re-enter the body". It is not merely new form with challenging content - its aim is to alter significantly the tenets of traditional morality.

... To destabilise patriarchy, ie. to change fundamentally the meaning and lives of women and men is to highlight the untenability of the body/mind distinction. The dancing body is, then, potentially a significant source of power in the sexual debate.

[de Marigny: 1989, 10]

This then identifies the struggle of physical theatre. The point is not to embrace an opposite militant stance. The point is to adopt an all encompassing stance rather than instill polarity on the issues of masculine/feminine, intellect/emotion, the arts/sciences. Marcel Mauss (1936) advocated a three-pronged study of the human body encompassing physiological, psychological and sociological approaches [Douglas: 1970, 65], All aspects contribute to individual creative endeavour. This is an informative model when engaging in the creative challenges of a physical theatre.

Physical theatre does have a political agenda but it is not to provide a counter argument in terms of the body/mind divide. It utilises this encompassing approach to argue for the legitimacy and potential of the body and to counteract the argument for the supremacy of the mind over the body. The body is mobilised as a source of power to question conventional views on race, gender, sexual stereotyping and sexuality. This new "physicality" should not be viewed as a negation of the word, the text or the rational, but should be seen rather as an integration of the physical with the vocal, mental and

' emotional resources of the performer.

r b i t ¥ E s

There may not always be the same political agenda amongst various exponents of Physical Theatre but there is always clear commitment to transformation - transformation of ideology, and to the notions of theatre, drama and dance. Physical Theatre becomes not only an enquiry into thematic content and ideology but also into form and structure. The body is the basis of the enquiry.

PHYSICAL THEATRE IN SOUTH AFRICA

Kershaw (1992) points out that physical theatre was one of the experimental theatre practices that developed as a reaction to mainstream theatre in Britain. He postulates specific correlations between the shifts in British post-war society and cultural practice.

Essentially the alternative ... theatre movement was a relatively small part of massive, successive ideological formations which sought to change British society ... These approaches all relate ultimately to the great socio-political forces which shaped post-war British society.

[Kershaw: 1992, 10]

Physical Theatre is clearly located in Britain but does it have any relevance for South African artists? There are plenty of exponents of physical theatre and dance theatre in England and Europe, but this theatre practice has also been explored if not named in South Africa. The creators and performers of Woza Albert!, Kwamanzi, The Hungry Earth, The Uglv Noo Noo, Homosexuals out in Africa, and Take the Floor all utilise physical statements as an integral part of the work - the notion of addressing physicality is not necessarily new. Performance in South Africa is reliant on the physical and vocal skills of the performers. This approach has characterised black expression in South Africa where there has always been a close integration between "song, lyric, tone, rhythm, movement, rhetoric, and drama" [Coplan: 1985, 4], This is part of South Africa's cultural heritage and now physical and vocal expressions are becoming an imaginative challenge for many current productions. The directions for the opening scenes of Woza Albert! illustrate this point.

On the first note of their music, overhead lights come on, sculpting them. They become an instrumental jazz band, using only their bodies and their mouths - double bass, saxophone, flute, drums, bongos, trumpet etc. At the climax of their performance, they transform into audience, applauding wildly.

[Mtwa et al: 1983, 1]

The narrative, characterisation and tones of works like Feedback and Take The Floor are as dependent on physical action as on words. Both these works were acclaimed by the critics at the 1994 Standard Bank National Festival of the Arts. With the voice and the body many exciting possibilities are available. The skill of the performer and the imagination of the audience can transform the space and translate the actor. And this is where I believe a fresh manifesto for theatre performers and theatre training is required. Physical Theatre is a theatre of ideas and action utilising the physical and vocal skills of the performer. 'It does not create a great divide between drama and dance. No more polarity! It draws together both motion and emotion and researches - or rather searches again - Artaud's dictum for "a language somewhere between gesture and thought". This time the dictum is researched in the context of southern Africa where for many years this rich approach to performance has been arrested. There is a cry in the country now - and there are also many initiatives - for new strategies in political systems, regional governments, educational strategies and artistic policies. Physical Theatre displays a tendency towards eschewing conventional approaches towards theatre making and performing and is an initiative towards the assertion of fresh and novel theatre alternatives. It is at this level that Physical Theatre can provide a creative environment in which artistic challenges will interact with personal, social, political, cultural and gender issues.

I would like to show you a short excerpt from *Shattered Windows*, a work made for The First Physical Theatre Company. Notice the costume design and the impact this has on sexual identity. "Is it dance?" - is a question I have often heard after a performance of this work. As choreographer I was always clear of the aesthetic: physical theatre.

MANIFESTO

I feel at this stage I should be nearing my conclusion but in reality I am back at the beginning. Physical Theatre as an artistic manifesto and as part of an arts training programme is in fact just beginning in South Africa. It is for this reason that I present you with a manifesto for further action and educational strategies rather than give evidence of a theatre accomplishment that has an extended historical record. There has been a past cultural heritage but it needs to be worked and questioned in the context of "now".

Last year, the RU Drama Department presented The First Physical Theatre Company. Shifting perceptions of theatre, dance, drama and gender are part of the company's Manifesto. An article on the company appeared recently in The Weekly Mail & Guardian, entitled "Stretching the definitions of dance".

The company is also intent on exploding gender stereotypes to take a deeper look at pairings and sexual preferences. Masculine and feminine are not relegated to their traditional functions within the dance. Women sweat. This is not the territory of soft-focus lenses, tutus and tiaras. Women are not aggrandised as fragile souls, to be lifted and carried across the stage by their muscular male partners. Instead, women lift male dancers and other female performers as often as men lift women.

[Dodd: 1994, 32]

I do believe some progress is being made and is recognised ...It is true, therefore, that we are at the beginning of this initiative. The best I can do is interact with the advice of the King to the White Rabbit in Alice in Wonderland:

"Begin at the beginning," the King said gravely, " and go on until you come to the end: then stop".

[Carroll: 1975, 103]

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