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DANCE MATTERS TOO

Markets, Memories, Identities

*Edited by Pallabi Chakravorty and
Nilanjana Gupta*

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WHY DANCE TODAY IN INDIA? THE ROLE OF DANCE PERFORMANCES IN AN ERA OF TRANSDISCIPLINARITY

A philosophical approach

Jean-Frédéric Chevallier

Why dance today in India? The title may appear ingenuous: “why?” is typically a question that children ask. And to say “India” is maybe excessive, as I will be talking mostly about West Bengal. I should also add “on stage,” as I will focus on performances shown to public. I will not analyze dances executed during Puja or on dance floors. So let’s say that this title just announces a small intention to question the role of dance performances in some parts of the Indian subcontinent today.

I will question this role in a philosophical way. In philosophy, it’s sometimes very useful to start thinking on a topic by deciding that we will forget all that we have already learned about it. Or even better: to start without knowing anything about it, to start with the pure experience of it. This, I believe, is a way to be more attentive to concrete and changing realities.

Let’s take as a basis for analysis four recent dance performances – each very different from the others – that I saw and experienced personally as an audience member: a Santhal one (by Borotalpada villagers during the Sixth Night of Theatre festival, Trimukhi Cultural Centre, West Midnapur, February 2013); a Bollywood one (by young non-professional girls, during a cultural programme organized by Sanlaap non-governmental organization (NGO), Rotary Sadan, Kolkata, October 2010); a Kuchipudi one (by Yamini Reddy during the Dover Lane Music Conference, Kolkata, January 2011); and a contemporary one (*Dialogue 2013 – Kolkata* by Sasha



Waltz and Padmini Chettur, Jorasanko Rajbati, Kolkata, January 2013). Later on, I will change this last adjective, ‘contemporary.’

I will proceed with a succession of questions and answers. The answer to the first question raises the next question that can be addressed with a simple answer that raises another question, another answer and so forth.

The first question that comes up: what do these quite different concrete cases show regarding the characteristics and specificities of dance that make this art different from other arts? (I ask this question because I believe that, in an era of transdisciplinarity, it’s by better understanding the singularity of dance that we can probably help dance to play a more active role in dialoguing with other arts as well as in reinventing itself.)¹ So, what do these concrete cases show regarding the characteristics and specificities of dance that make this art different from other arts?

There may not be a global answer, but at least a series of small ones that when combined give a good hint about what dance specifically is.

First, dance involves *present* bodies. We can even say dance *presents* present bodies.

Second, we can add immediately that, at least in the cases I selected, dance presents *present body in movement*: the bodies are physically moving.

By taking into consideration just these two characteristics (presentation and movement), our main question arises: *Why* present *present bodies in movement*? *Why* do we do it? *What for*?

The answer I would like to give is strongly inspired by both the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze and the German choreographer Pina Bausch. The former, at the beginning of *Difference and Repetition* (1968), proposes to distinguish between a *physical movement* and a *spiritual one*: the purpose of the physical movement on stage is to put in movement the spirit of each member of the audience – the spirit or the mind or the soul or the heart, depending on which word you prefer to use. And the choreographer said that the motor of her work was to find the movements that would be able to touch people. And a few months before her death (2009), Pina Bausch insisted on this point. She was thinking, she said, “about the way to be put in movement, moved, moved internally. In German, the same word *bewegt* means both putting in movement physically, and being moved emotionally.”² So here we have a kind of an answer: why present *present bodies in movement*? To put the audience in movement internally or spiritually.

Deleuze wrote:

it is a question of producing within the work a movement capable of affecting the mind outside of all representation; it is a question





of making movement itself a work, without interposition; of substituting direct signs for mediate representations; of inventing vibrations, rotations, whirlings, gravitations, dances or leaps which directly touch the mind.³

We get here the same shape of ideas as those I explained just before. But there is also something else: it is a question of putting in movement “outside of all representation,” “without interposition”; it is a question of touching *directly* the mind.

Among the four examples I have taken up, you can immediately tell that there is at least one that doesn’t operate in the aforementioned fashion. In the Kuchipudi dance performed in Kolkata during the Dover Lane Music Conference 2011, the movements of Yamini Reddy were meant to mean something. In fact this seems to be the case for all Indian ‘classical’ dances.⁴ In Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Kathakali, Manipuri, Kuchipudi or Odissi dances, the movements of the dancers on stage are meant to represent for the audience a specific episode of, for example, the *Mahabharata* or the *Ramayana*. The *present* bodies would be *representing* something through their movements. We would not be in a choreographic set-up that tends to work “outside of all representation,” “without interposition.” If it were still a question of touching the mind of the audience, it would not be *directly* but *indirectly*, with a narrative interposition, first bringing an understanding of the story that is represented through the movements of bodies. If I still feel the touch, it is not for the movement itself but for what the movement represents. Let’s say for instance, what it makes me think about the terrible and unfair situation of Draupadi when she was dragged by her hair in front of the entire Duryodhana court and was disrobed for further humiliation.

But here is, maybe, my funniest hypothesis for the day: in that case, what is represented doesn’t matter really. *The representation is somehow transparent to the presentation*. Because what happens usually at the beginning of a “classical” dance programme in Kolkata? Sometimes an event coordinator will first explain to the audience, with a lot of details, which episode is about to be *represented*. When there are no such coordinators, as soon as the performance starts, you will hear soft murmurings among the audience: everybody is talking with his or her neighbour to identify as quickly as possible which episode is being represented. The murmurings stop after a couple of minutes. At this stage, *the audience no longer cares about the storytelling*. It has been freed from that worry. On the contrary, what each one is doing is appreciating – or not appreciating – the quality of the movements that are being executed at present. You can enquire at the end of the performance, and the comments you will receive will be about the body movements themselves, but not what these movements were supposed to





represent. Finally, each member of the audience is open to be touched *directly* by the *present* bodies in *movement* he or she is seeing. One looks towards the *presentation* and not the *representation*. So in this case too, we can speak about dance as the *presentation* of bodies in movement that put the minds *directly* in movement.

Now, let's point out a third characteristic. After a prolonged dialogue, the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy and the choreographer Mathilde Monnier published a book, *Alliterations. Conversations about Dance* (2006). In it, they underlined the fact that "the issue of non-significance is more sensitive, more compelling"⁵ in dance than in other arts. To say simply: *it's much easier while watching dance to understand that there is nothing to understand*. The immediate appeal of one body movement that touches us directly makes obvious that what is important is that our mind or our spirit is being moved. It's because what happens in my mind is not at all *insignificant* for me that I forget about trying to find a *significance* in it.

This is very obvious in the case of the Santhal dance. This dance is fascinating. It produces a sort of quiet excitation. There is a terrible force in it but exercised in a sweet manner. And it would be difficult to explain where it comes from. Is it the rhythm? Is it the group togetherness? Is it the repetition of the same steps with slight and progressive accelerations and modifications that makes the same other? It could seem that nothing changes, but at the same time, eyes never get tired of watching the uninterrupted displacement of the women dancers.



Figure 11.1 Santhal dance

Source: Photo by the author.





In linguistic terms, if we take as “signs” the series of movements that compose a Santhal dance, we can say that these “signs” do not convey any meaning.⁶ The signs first touched me, moved me, put me in movement internally. And if something of a meaning came afterwards, it was not because of these specific “signs” but because of the deepness of my own feelings: why did I feel like that, so strongly, when they were performing their dance? And if this question arises – why? – it’s at the end, not at the beginning. “The issue of non-significance is more *sensitive*” in dance because I was first of all considerably moved by what I felt – so deeply that the question of the sense (meaning) appeared later and concerned my own senses (feelings). In dance, it is because our senses are first touched that finally we wonder about the sense not of what we watch but of what we feel.

There is something else that surprises me in Santhal dances. All the villagers who were enjoying the dance that evening were also dancers. They did not dance that day but they could have danced because they knew perfectly each step that was to come. This observation can be a fourth characteristic for our list. We can say *in India, dancers watch dancers*. The audience watching Yamini Reddy’s dance show that night at the Dover Lane Festival included Kuchipudi dance practitioners. And it would be a much larger part in the case of Odissi or Kathak shows. Most of the audience, even if not all as in the Santhal example, also knows the sequence of movements to be executed.

What for? What is the use of watching movements one is already familiar with? How can one be so deeply moved inside by something one knows beforehand? The answer is tricky: one is touched not exactly by *what* the dancers are doing (I mean movements) but more specifically by *how* they are doing *what* they are doing. The audience does not look at *what* but at *how*. This is why it is sometimes important to know the ‘what,’ so as not to have to focus on it anymore. The energy of our attention can be dedicated to other things.

I understood this more clearly when, in October 2010, I saw a cultural programme organized by Sanlaap NGO, at Rotary Sadan. One of the numbers was a Bollywood dance performed by teenager girls. Here you had the same set-up: people (including me this time) were watching movements that they already knew because they had seen the film from which the movements were extracted – and if not the full film, at least the musical parts of it. In this particular case, I would add that the movements were specially not appealing: they lacked this acrobatic dimension that Bollywood choreographies sometimes possess, they were not as elaborate and graceful as “classical” dance gestures can be and not so riveting and hypnotizing as in the Santhal dance I referred to. And even worse, part of the





team was visibly not too deeply involved in the dance: they had problems of synchronization. So it would be hard to say that the movements played an important role. But something was happening, something very touching, no less accurate and relevant than in the other cases I mentioned before. Some of the young, non-professional dancers were full of light and life. And that was enough to enlighten us. It was their singular presences at that present moment that put us in movement much more than what they were doing.⁷

So what is the use of watching movements one already knows? Maybe there are not one but two ways of answering the question. The first one would be *what matters in dance are not the dance we see but the dance we start inside*. The second one would be it is not the physical movement in itself that imports but its present quality, singularity, flavour. And the two answers are not mutually exclusive. In fact, in their crossing we'll find a kind of definition of *contemporary art*.

When I say 'contemporary art,' I refer to my own definition of it. Let me give you the theoretical context.

I am considering four regimes of art, four esthetical dynamics or strategies, four different manners of involving together artists and audience – the "contemporary" one being the fourth and last. There is a *sacred* (or ritualistic) *regime* (where a god is invoked and asked to come or else the audience invited to enter in relation with him); a *regime of representation* (where a society is represented by the artist, through perspective in the sense of the artistic technique, and critically or not); an 'expressionist' or '*impressionist*' *regime* (where the artist communicates his impressions of the world) that can be more or less what we usually call 'modern art'; and finally a contemporary or *presentative* or spiritual *regime*, where it is question of producing inner movements through *the combination of different and singular presences*. In fact when, at the beginning I was quoting the philosopher Gilles Deleuze and the choreographer Pina Baush, or pointing at *the presentation of present bodies in movement*, I was already talking about this last regime of the arts: the "contemporary" one

Dialogue 2013 – Kolkata is a performance that all of you would agree to call contemporary. The German Sasha Waltz and the Indian Padmini Chettur organized a journey inside the Jorasanko Rajbati decadent palace that not only presented bodies in movement but also invited the audience to move physically from one room to another to see what was happening in the whole building. It is something Sasha Waltz has used before, for example in the piece *Inside/Out*. But in Kolkata, the set-up was not built for the show; it was already here, it was already *present*. In what was *presented* in the building, the building was also *present* (and *presented*), the objects and furniture it contained, as well as the sixteen Sasha Waltz dancers, her son and





daughter, the five Padmini Chettur dancers, and objects and films that both teams had brought. It was this combination of *heterogeneous* and present elements that participated to transform the physical journey into an inner journey, different for each one in the audience. It is the heterogeneity of this combination of elements that makes this performance contemporary, or at least more contemporary than the three other ones – more contemporary because more ‘heterogeneous.’

Just a little more contemporary because to a certain extent the other three examples I gave are *contemporary* performances too. It may sound paradoxical, but this is where our quadruple concrete study leads us. Not only in *Dialogue 2013 – Kolkata* but in the Santhal piece too as well as in the Kuchipudi and the Bollywood ones, the purpose is to *presently* awaken the own senses of the audience through combinations of *present* bodies and elements.

So why dance today in India? What for?

A first answer can be because when dance has an effect on us, we start dancing inside, we are in movement, we are alive. An internal dance that each one of us has probably at least once executed when something truly happened in the midst of a dance performance.

And there is a second way of answering, remembering what we just said about the adjective contemporary. It may be useful and even necessary – because provocative – to stress the fact that in India today, any dance on stage, any choreographic programme – professional as well as non-professional – is always a *contemporary* art device.

Etymologically, contemporary means to be with our present time. That doesn’t mean to be submitted to it but somehow to be pushed ahead from it. There is a power of disturbance in tribal, classical, Bollywood or contemporary dance – and obviously in hybrid choreographic forms – that should not be left to the side if dance has to play a meaningful role in fast-changing India, that means inviting thinking about India itself as a place with inhabitants that vitally need to be constantly put in movement, inside and outside of their present time and local reality.

Notes

- 1 In July 2012, I participated in a panel discussion about transdisciplinarity and performing arts. It was in Ecuador. What I found interesting was that, in a certain way, transdisciplinarity is not even a new phenomenon. There have been similar dynamics previously. Looking into the past, in Asia or in Europe, the performing arts rarely worked alone or were isolated: if there was dance, there was music to go with it, and if there was theatre, there was dance and so forth. Sometimes the word ‘dance’ did not exist





at all, because the reality to describe was other, something involving an ensemble that we now separate and call ‘theatre,’ ‘dance’ or ‘music.’ But today transdisciplinarity is also a kind of creative invitation, an invitation to constantly reinvent the ways we make art and the conceptual categories we use to think about it: an invitation to compose a piece of dance in the way we cook a meal or to question ways to write a short novel by studying a musical composition. To think specifically on dance is an accurate way to answer this lively invitation.

- 2 Delahaye, Guy, Jean-Marc Adolphe, and Michel Bataillon. *Pina Bausch*. Arles: Actes Sud, 2009, p. 25. Translation is mine.
- 3 Deleuze, Gilles. *Difference and Repetition*. London: Continuum, 1997, p. 9.
- 4 I put ‘classical’ in scare quotes as it has been shown in *Dance Matters 2*, in particular by Pallabi Chakravorty, that the notion of classical dance is not so pertinent or, at least, should be strongly interrogated and criticized.
- 5 Nancy, Jean-Luc and Mathilde Monnier. *Allitérations. Conversations sur la danse*. Paris: Galilée, 2005, p. 34. Translation is mine.
- 6 Originally they are a stylization of the movements people were doing for plugging, harvesting and/of collecting in the forest. But they are not performed as a representation of these actions.
- 7 I wish to have a real knowledge about the theory of flavours – *rasa* – as it came in the *Nāṭya-shāstra*. Part of what I am trying to describe and analyze using contemporary continental philosophy concepts would probably find echoes in this Sanskrit treatise. What the audience enjoyed that day at Rotary Sadan may be called a flavour, the flavour of a dancing body.

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