

GSFS/DANC 0285A: Ethics, Aesthetics, and the Body

Performance Review 2: *Landing/Shifting*

Melisande Brie McLaughlin

April 24th, 2016

Meaning in Motion in Maree ReMalia's *Landing/Shifting*

The performance of *Landing/Shifting* begins before the audience enters the space. A tessellation of about one hundred fawn-coloured gypsum board hexagons paves a path upstage left to downstage right with at each end a larger cluster connected by a snaking trail. Choreographer and dancer, Maree ReMalia, sits with her knees drawn loosely to her chest, her hands resting upon them in the upstage mosaic, facing across the left wings. Silvina Lopez Barrera transposes this position onto her side in the downstage arrangement, lying in foetal form facing ReMalia. Both dancers are dressed in street clothes, wearing casual grey shirts and pants, rebuffing the traditional use of theatrical costuming in dance. This is merely the start of a piece that will proceed to further align itself with postmodernism as it seems to reject “spectacle,” “eccentricity,” “seduction of spectator by the wiles of the performer” and numerous other ideas referred to in Yvonne Rainer *No Manifesto* (1965). Yet, a distinction must be made between ReMalia's work and those of many postmodernist artists as she states, “I think the difference is I am trying to become more me and to invite the people with which I am working to be more them, somehow affirmative of who we are and what we believe rather than operating against something” (2016). Unlike Rainer who actively attempted to discard any pre-existing conceptions of what dance should be and how the dancer should move, ReMalia works to discover raw movement for herself, from herself, and not against others. In doing so she is entering into an “unnamed era, or category, or category-less sector of

dance” beyond postmodernism, reclaiming her body for all that it is rather than rejecting what it is not (ReMalia, 2016).

The house goes dark and the stage is submerged in soft yellow light with a vivid beam from the right wings illuminating the structure of ReMalia’s face. As a multi layered soundscape developed by David Miranda Hardy consisting primarily of metal reverberations and eerie astronomical sounds gradually fills the room, she lifts her chin and turns her head mechanically in isolation from the rest of her body. She lowers her eyes when directly facing the audience, and glances towards Barrera. Each feature of her solemn expression is accentuated under the shifting angles of light. It must be noted that throughout the piece, the dancers constantly avert eye contact with the spectators, concerning themselves instead with their own bodies – when a hand comes up to their side, their face tilts and gaze follows. *Landing/Shifting* shifts discourse beyond the physical appearance of the dancers to their corporeal experiences - their movement, motion and subjectivity – and pushes the audience to develop a sense of identification through kinaesthetic empathy rather than a sense of visual pleasure (Albright, 1997).

Both dancers see each other for the first time as a deep, pounding sound layers onto the music. ReMalia’s gaze returns to its original facing and Barrera sits to mirror her form. Lifting their arms with ninety-degree bends in their elbows, they bring their forearms straight in front of their eyes with their palms flat and sharply rotate their wrists. They continuously and unsymmetrically change the facings of their hands, gazing curiously at them as though discovering new movement. It appears as though they are going through what Jacques Lacan termed the “mirror stage;” making sense of the ideas presented to each of them by the other through an assimilation process in the body of ideas that they already possess. In doing so the dancers are no longer directing a personal account to the audience members, but enabling them to personally engage in the co-creation of meaning in their bodies and art. While ReMalia allows the audience

to interpret the movement as they may, she keeps her eyes' focused on her own body, which forces them to remain acutely aware of her control over her movement in space.

She shifts her pelvis forward, bringing her toes to the periphery of the arrangement, her hands reaching out towards the curtains as a child might reach forward to grasp an object in the newly exposed realm and the existence of others in that realm. The dancers are developing an awareness of themselves as objects that can be externally as well as internally observed and acquiring the ability to distinguish what Susan Leigh Foster terms the "perceived" body, which derives primarily from kinaesthetic information, and the "demonstrative" body, which derives primarily from visual information (1997). In differentiating these two bodies, the dancers are highlighting the potential for deception in their demonstrative bodies' alleged ability to communicate the inner sensations, emotions and dispositions of their perceived bodies. In other words, the audience is being made aware that what they see will never fully enable them to grasp an accurate understanding of the dancers' experiences or choreographer's intentions, if anything specific is intended at all. As she reaches beyond the edge of the mosaic, ReMalia's hands retreat to her face and roll her rearward onto her back.

Continuing on from this motion her hands move across her body and press her upwards out of the gypsum board space onto all fours with her pelvis rolled up in a bent-kneed downward-dog position. Barrera rapidly jumps up to mirror ReMalia and they both shift into 'en dedans pliés,' not facing each other, their left hands holding their outer right thighs. Indeed, mirroring is used repeatedly throughout *Landing/Shifting*, at times with one performer reflecting the other with only seconds of delay, to demonstrate individuals' constant attempts to fathom others' movement by recreating them in their own bodies. In doing so they are not only developing distinct individual understandings of the dance, both somatic and cerebral, but also fortifying their ownership of their actions. Once presented with two different constructions of the same movement, the spectator

observes, compares, interprets, and is, as Jacques Rancière put it, emancipated: “she links what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen on other stages, in other kinds of places. She composes her own poem with the elements of the poem before her” (2009, p. 13). In other words, the audience feels equally propelled to develop personal relationships and responses through kinaesthetic empathy but remains well aware that these understandings are not those of the dancers. (Albright, 1997).

The dancers begin to move their hips in slow circular motions, coming up to ‘relevé’ with knees still bent, pressing back into a rearwards run with rights arms extended out at their sides. As they complete a full circle in space, each halts suddenly centre-stage, feet together and spines straightened. They sink into downstage right facing lunges, alternating legs with each step and rocking their bent arms back and forth like pendulums along the sides of their bodies. This simple movement is not rushed and the dancers appear not to display any sense of effort in their facial expressions. They perform their movements as though performing tasks, displaying no great emotion or exertion, but pure materiality. Despite “the inherent contagion of bodily movement, which makes the onlooker feel sympathetic in his own musculature,” this perfunctory way of moving makes it almost impossible in *Landing/Shifting* to know how to begin attempting to comprehend what one imagines the dancers intend to have the audience understand, if anything is intended at all (Albright, 1997, p. 7). This is largely due to the movement being minimalist and, similarly to Rainer’s *Trio A*, polemic in its assiduous attempt to reject some of dance’s primary tendencies as it says “no to style,” and “no to camp” (Rainer, 1965). As Brenda Dixon Gottschild explains, “one of the easiest ways to disempower others is to measure them by a standard which ignores their chosen aesthetic frame of reference, and its particular demands” (1997, p. 171). By separating the audience from what is commonly expected in a theatrical dance context, ReMalia’s minimalist aesthetic and pedestrian movements sustain the goal of a more direct, unmediated,

authentic bodily experience that transgresses the boundary between art and life. As a result, the spectator is forced to question the nature and ethics of spectatorship and accept his inability to comprehend, and perhaps dictate, the dancers' subjectivity in performance, focusing instead on understanding how he places his own cerebral postulations onto the dancers' physical reality. Although Rainer worked with minimisation to demonstrate how "the human being can be treated as an object, dealt with as an entity without feeling or desire", ReMalia worked to demonstrate the duality of the human being as an independent moving and thinking entity that holds the capacity for self-guided propulsion but whose feelings and desires cannot be fully deciphered through the body (Rainer, 1974, 134).

Landing/Shifting is not an anti-dance, which favoured banal movements, non-expression, and randomness as though it is "anti-spectacular" as Rainer might put it; it is equally "spectacular" as the dancers surreptitiously demonstrate a great amount of technique. Reaching the extremity of their space they pull their right knees up to their chests and balance with flexed feet and bodies collapsed forward. Dropping their legs, they quickly grab their other knee in the same position then repeat the action multiple times, decreasing the magnitude, height and force at which they clasp their limbs with each recurrence until they are no longer holding but simply tapping the sides of their calves as they shift between feet. This seemingly desperate attempt to cling and possess their bodies, transforms into abandon. The dancers brusquely reach away from themselves with chests open, fall into a wide second position, scoop their arms across their bodies reaching right then left to finally pull themselves around to face back. There they pause briefly with bent knees, facing away from the audience as though to hide their identity and arms above their heads as though to surrender. It seems that they are discovering that is not only impossible but unnecessary to discard all social discourses, conventions and accepted methods of communication, just as it is unnecessary to disregard training, in order for them to independently repossess their body, Though

the movements appear to be frantic and performed with less than balletic grace, their execution is precise. Hopping left across the stage, they steady themselves in a pli   before performing a grand battement to the side with their right legs, which descend behind them and pull them downwards to the floor as they roll onto their backs. The height of the dancers’ legs in their battement as well as the control and fluidity in which they were able to descend to the floor makes no secret of their classical training. As ReMalia states: “My early training and professional experience performing ballet are a presence I can not seem to shake. I also have to acknowledge my upbringing, family, friends, and life experiences, which colour every part of me” (2016). She is highlighting the flaws of Yvonne Rainer’s paradigmatic *No Manifesto*, and showing that avoiding stylisation is in itself a form of stylisation. Classical training is not necessarily the removal of a “natural” way of moving but the discovery of an alternative method as “social relations are both enacted and produced through the body, and not merely inscribed upon it” (Desmond, 1997, p. 33). The body is not “natural” but “socially constructed” and this construction inevitably plays a great role in the production of all dance. The dancers’ movements are “no longer a product of training, of narrative, of consumption” but a process of becoming the self and defining the self’s function in society rather than in an unwavering display of the body and its *habitus*¹ (Albright, 1997, p. 19).

Using their feet, the performers drag their bodies forward about a meter to sit up and reach abruptly forward before rolling back over their shoulders into foetal position. ReMalia rises and runs upstage right then hops forwards and backward twice before turning with her torso parallel to the ground with her right hand reaching towards Barrera, who runs across the stage to mirror the position at her right. Unlike ReMalia whose reach touches only empty space, Barrera’s hand reaches for ReMalia’s legs. A sudden rumble of metal is heard in the soundscape to which the dancers react by ceasing contact with each other, now standing straight, flat footed, with hands and

¹ *Habitus*: the physical embodiment of social structures (Desmond, 1997, p. 30).

arms extended above themselves. There are very few moments of contact between the two dancers in *Landing/Shifting* in contrast to constant return to moments of contact with their own bodies. As the sound begins to roll into a rumble, they rotate their hand and wrist together, and then step into pliés with their hands reaching to touch the outer surface of the opposite thigh. ReMalia returns this as an almost solipsistic moment where the dancers are stabilised in space to repossess the one thing that they, exclusively, can fully understand themselves. They seem to be demonstrating that just as the audience cannot feel what it is to touch or occupy the dancers' figures, the dancers cannot understand their partners if not for more than brief moments at a time as they are ever shifting. They fall back into a backwards run with their right arms extended as female voices in the soundscape repeatedly call out a sequence of four sounds that cannot be clearly distinguished as words. The dancers stop upstage right and again press their wrists together in front of their pelvises while holding 'demi pliés en parallél,' then rotate their wrists in a circular motion around themselves as though holding a small spherical object. They place their hands in a brittle, angular position and move them staccato before stopping, collapsing onto their knees and pulling their hands up to their faces as though taking a moment of introspection before returning to vertical. The voices that cover this movement are in fact those of the performers, asked by Hardy to record sounds of what they perceived as "intimate." In this moment the dancers demonstrate a consciousness of a palpable structure in space that is in fact only cerebrally constructed, one that the audience cannot physically observe but is pushed to conceptually perceive, just as their vocalisations in the music are not words that can be straightforwardly understood. In both movement and sound, the audience must accept that they will never be fully able to understand what the performers are visualising or what they hold as "intimate" just as they must equally accept that each individual in the world beyond dance will have their own perceptions of and reactions to the various constructions of society and that they are impermanent or ever-evolving.

ReMalia breaks suddenly into a series of steps, varying between small hops, light toe taps, and lunges. Barrera, shortly after, begins to repeat fragmented phrases from the already-seen choreography across the trail of gypsum board hexagons. ReMalia falls again into a backward run as Barrera runs forward to jump to her knees, landing first on the top of her left foot then right, before rolling with bent knees and crawling precipitately up and down while observing the mosaic trail. ReMalia repeatedly hops forward, landing in pliés with her hips considerably tilted right above the left, then passes through a grand battement and also drops to the floor to crawl in haste towards the gypsum boards. Barrera moves to abruptly stop herself in a standing position with her feet hip width apart, her back flat, parallel to floor, and her arms held straight, perpendicular to her sides. As aforementioned, the dancers move systematically throughout the piece, making the unmoving points all the more significant. They allow the dancers' frozen bodies to be registered like snapshots or suspended moments of climax in the viewers' eyes and minds. Yvonne Rainer expressed a particular disdain for the act of being still as she felt it structured the dancers for the viewer's visual pleasure and reinforced the power of the gaze over performers. ReMalia, however, uses these moments of stillness not as instants for the viewer to judge the dancers but for both the dancers and viewer to reflect together on what they are experiencing. The poses held in stillness are never extravagant arabesques or even relevés but simple moments of sitting with bent knees or standing with arms straight. With the simplicity of these positions, the audience needs not exert themselves to decipher the performers' intentions and focuses instead on making the necessary connections between what they have witnessed in movement and their own understandings. ReMalia and Barrera's ballet training is naturally apparent in their postures as they hold rather familiar positions but, as they accept this technical training to be a part of their movement vocabulary and do not try actively to discard it, it seems they are making no particular effort to impress the audience thus seeming to refute the power of the viewers' gaze.

As Barrera moves to walk straight to the arrangement of gypsum board hexagons, ReMalia mirrors this positioning then runs to meet her across the jagged trail of hexagons, stopping her from crossing by pressing a hand firmly on the dancer's head without looking at her. As Barrera continues to walk forward, tension builds in their point of contact of her head with ReMalia's hand, and shifts their movement towards the upstage left disposition of gypsum board hexagons. This tension breaks as they collapse onto the structure before returning to the position in which ReMalia began, knees loosely drawn to their chests, hands resting on their knees, gazing straight forward. This moment of strong physical interaction appears to be a more forceful attempt on ReMalia's part to finally understand Barrera on a deeper level. This contact triggers a return to the opening of *Landing/Shifting*, now to begin a new exploration of their bodies in space but this time as partners aware of one and other. They rotate their heads in isolation of their bodies and give seemingly instinctive smiles to acknowledge each other when they make eye contact. This smile brings a fresh quality into *Landing/Shifting* and gives the dancers a personification that stands against Rainer's notion of the human as an "object-like" being. Rolling over onto their stomachs then to their knees in child's pose, they begin to push apart each gypsum board hexagon with their flat palms, one by one, then in pairs, and finally all together. Bringing their hands up from the floor they fall backwards out of the hexagonal structure only to roll back onto their knees, now pushing the entire shape hurriedly into a pile towards the downstage right corner. They stop momentarily in the centre of the space and turn away from the shapes, then share a moment of eye contact as the lights dim, before returning to their task. A narrow beam of light piercing out from the left wings highlights the dust particles that are unsettled by the collision of these gypsum board structures. They have dismantled the structure in which they symbolically attempted to understand each other, realising that it is impossible to fully comprehend another individual if basing this has

apprehension in not deviating from socially constructed lines as each individual is unique and their identity fluid.

The light rises again as the dancers slowly stand and turn to walk away from the mass of hexagonal cut-outs, each following a different arc, together forming both symmetrical and unsymmetrical calligraphic shapes with their movements across the now open space; running forward in figure eights and rearwards in lines across the space with their arms constantly returning to make contact when they walk side by side. Breaking in and out of these runs they repeat sequences of previously seen phrases from the dance in synced double-time with each other, frequently looking up to make eye contact. The varying order of phrasing and irregular development in *Landing/Shifting* demonstrates that the dancers' movements could flow in a variety of orders from one to another and, as in many postmodern dances, the piece does not follow any specific narrative line. ReMalia describes this as "part of the power and beauty of dance, that it can be powerful and indirect and potentially get at the ideas and emotions and experiences that exist between the logic of words or pantomime or linear storytelling" (2016). The audience is invited to have their own experience and the dancers are permitted to exist in themselves beyond reifications of archetypal characters or narratives. They incorporate moments where they tap their toes on the stage or stand still, breaking the flow of this amalgam of movements, to finally find each other side by side in the far right corner, backs straight, gazing forward, facing downstage right.

As the lights begin to fade, they bring their wrists to their foreheads with fingers splayed, repeatedly rotate their heads from left to right and walk towards the accumulation of gypsum board hexagons. Looking at the floor they hesitantly lower themselves to the ground, keeping their backs straight and feet en relevé. Once they arrive in steady seated positions on the ground they look out at the audience and the room goes dark. In this closing moment of eye contact, ReMalia

and Barrera allow themselves to see and be seen by their audience. Here they demonstrate an awareness of the spectators watching, as though they had known the whole time yet still continued to move independently. By refuting the audience's voyeurism until this point, the dance was not something to be watched but seen. Throughout *Landing/Shifting*, a "blender of classical line and formal composition, pedestrian-ish sensibility, invitation of the slightly unfamiliar, and intuitive sense of time," the audience sees the dancers move with what ReMalia describes as "honest movement expressions that are reflective of the people with which I am working from a broad range of abilities, identities, histories, and perspectives" (2016). Their humanising gazes allow the dancers to display themselves on stage without being reduced or equated purely to their physical existences and to take possession of their minds as well as bodies. Moreover, the metonymy found in ReMalia's kinaesthetic, spatial, and choreographic demonstrations not only curbs the audience's ability to shape single characters for the dancers but forces them to accept the ever-changing nature of all individuals. Unlike Rainer and many postmodern artists, ReMalia is not attempting to reject old or construct new identities, or feminist spaces, or to create asexual works, but wants to enable the performers and audience the freedom to move beyond social constructions completely. It is undeniable that ReMalia will face challenges in how her audiences perceive her dance, notably as they try to develop stable understandings of the performers' experiences, but she expresses no need to control these views as she believes they exist in a constant state of *Landing and Shifting*.

References:

1. Albright, A. C. (1997). *Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
2. Desmond, J. C. (1997). *Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies*. In J. C. Desmond (Ed.), *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance* (pp. 29-53). Durham: Duke University Press.
3. Foster, S. L. (1997). *Dancing Bodies*. In J. C. Desmond (Ed.), *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance* (pp. 235-258). Durham: Duke University Press.
4. Gottschild, B. D. (1997). *Some Thoughts on Choreographing History*. In J. C. Desmond (Ed.), *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance* (pp. 167-177). Durham: Duke University Press.
5. Rainer, Y. (1965). *Some Retrospective Notes on a Dance for 10 People and 12 Mattresses Called "Parts of Some Sextets," Performed at the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut, and Judson Memorial Church, New York, in March, 1965*. *The Tulane Drama Review*, 10(2), 168–178. <http://doi.org/10.2307/1125242>
6. Rancière, J. (2009). *The Emancipated Spectator* (G. Elliott, Trans.). London: Verso.
7. ReMalia, M. (2016, March 23). [Personal interview].
8. Stanich, V. D. (2014). *Poetics and Perception: Making Sense of Postmodern Dance* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). The Ohio State University.