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Performance, Embodiment, Voice: the Theatre/Dance Cross-overs of Dodin, Bausch, and Forsythe

The closing decades of the twentieth century and the opening years of the twenty-first have seen a wide range of hybrid and cross-over performance forms, dance/theatre being prominent among them. In this article, Maria Shevtsova outlines the similarities between the working principles of director Lev Dodin and those of the choreographers Pina Bausch and William Forsythe, suggesting how they have set and still exemplify current trends in a networked world (Castells) of precarity (Bourdieu) and uncertainty. She also explores a broader socio-artistic context for her focus. This text is a slightly modified version of a belated inaugural lecture for her third appointed professorial chair, at Goldsmiths College, University of London, in March 2002. Maria Shevtsova is an Advisory Editor of NTQ, whose recent publications include 'Theatre and Interdisciplinarity' (2001), a special issue she guest-edited for *Theatre Research International*, and 'The Sociology of the Theatre' (2002), edited for *Contemporary Theatre Review*, which includes her essay, 'Appropriating Pierre Bourdieu's Champ and Habitus for a Sociology of Stage Productions'. Her book on Lev Dodin and the Maly Drama Theatre of St Petersburg is due for publication in 2003.

FIVE main currents of my research underlie this paper, although whether they surface sufficiently will be for you to see. Indeed, I prefer to say 'for you to *hear*', since your inner voice will be interpreting mine, and adding from your thoughts to it in that dialogical relationship between speaker and listener through which sense and meaning are established.

This two-way flow is the very stuff of performance, whatever the space designated as the site of performance may be – proscenium arch, thrust stage, warehouse, defunct tube station, or any other dedicated or found space. It is this interaction between performers, the performance they make together with designers, musicians, and other collaborators, and the spectators who engage with what is being made that has guided me to study the sign processes, or semioses, of performance.

Such signs as gesture, mimicry, movement, dialogue, the paralinguistic qualities of voice, and silence are integral to a given work and communicate something to someone. What is understood in the communication is not necessarily grasped on a cognitive level. Understanding is also emotional, subliminal, unconscious, latent, and very often after the event. Yet, however it occurs, performance relies on these multiple ways of taking in. I have referred to 'sign *processes*' because the concept of process contains the idea of agency developed by sociology, which is indispensable when performance is not regarded as a thing – even a beautiful *objet d'art* art thing – but as a *practice*: that is, as a doing by doers or agents of action in societies and cultures.

The first current of my paper, then, concerns the theory of sociocultural signs that I have developed to counter the asocial, thing-centred semiotics which was influential for several decades in the humanities and the social sciences. Theatre semiotics, for example, focused on procedures for building models which functioned as self-enclosed systems. Much of it was bogged down in reading and text analogues, which have remained pervasive to this day. So, you 'read' a performance 'text', the very notion of 'text' eliding the specificity of performance which, irrespective of whether it is defined as 'theatre',

'performance art', or just plain 'performance' is a matter of practice above all else. Sometimes the semiotic models are refined constructions, but, like epiphenomena in respect of phenomena, prove to be of little analytical use for explaining what actually happens in a performance, why it happens, when it happens, and for whom.

I would include in this school of thought philosopher Jacques Derrida's famous notion of *différance*, by which signs merely point to other signs in an endless chain of signification: the term 'signification' is to be distinguished from 'meaning', since, in Derrida's theory, 'meaning' is unstable and always deferred.[1] Equally, I would here include Jean Baudrillard's inversion of systemic semiotics by which chains of signs and significations implode in hyperreality – Baudrillard's concept for the phantasmagoria of endlessly vanishing signs and disappearing objects where anything potentially 'real' is swallowed up in symbolic representations that have lost sight of the materiality they (falsely) appeared to represent.[2]

This is the ultimate non-reality and non-meaning, the ultimate nihilism to which Baudrillard claims allegiance. Thus, in contrast, a conception of sociocultural signs – signs that are not disembodied *à la* Baudrillard or deconstructed *ad infinitum* in the manner of Derrida – is crucial for indicating how, on the contrary, works of performance *embody* the social and cultural dynamics in which they are generated. In other words, the point is to understand and explain how and why such works are social through and through rather than abstracted in the ether of art – a view that Pierre Bourdieu terms 'the ideology of art for art's sake'.[3] Bourdieu incorporates in his critique of this 'ideology' Kantian aesthetics, Sartrean ontology, and related theories of individual consciousness and theories of subjectivity, among them that of 'intersubjectivity', of which Luc Ferry, in the French context, might be taken as a representative thinker.[4]

Let me give you an example of what I mean by embodied sociocultural signs from *The Cherry Orchard* (1994), as directed by Lev Dodin at the Maly Drama Theatre of St Petersburg, to which company I shall soon return. The actor who plays Firs, the old servant of the house, reclines on a sofa and closes his eyes. After a longish pause, the burning candle, which he holds close to his chest, slips from his hands. Firs could have fallen asleep. Even so, the pause is long enough, and the actor still enough, to allow spectators, in a delayed reaction or afterimage, to interpret the intended message correctly: namely, that Firs has just died.

The Signs of the Everyday

The mini-scene is generally comprehensible, but has special sociocultural resonance for the spectators who are aware that how the actor places the candle at the centre of his chest refers to Russian Orthodox funeral rites. These spectators will have perceived the significance of the actor's gesture at the very moment he positions the candle, as if he were placing it in Firs's dead hands. They will have done so because the actor's 'techniques of the body', as the anthropologist Marcel Mauss characterizes body behaviour, have embodied very precisely the ways of doing that, as Mauss indicates, are not given by nature, but are socially imbibed and imbued differently, according to different societies and different groups within them.[5]

The kind of perspective that I have outlined goes some way to solving the problem of how performances are to be contextualized, which is important for identifying what is distinctive about them, not least in stylistic or formal terms. Both identification and contextualization begin to be possible when the clues are taken to be *in* the work at hand, just as the signs of 1960s America are inside Andy Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Cans* or *210 Coca-Cola Bottles* when they are framed as art.

Once it is clear that the signs of the everyday are appropriated, refashioned, and internalized by a work, whether they be Warhol's icons of consumerism or Dodin's of religion, the traditional dichotomies bothering scholars between work and context, inside and outside, foreground and background – in short, between the world of art and that of society,

history, economics, politics – show their inadequacy.

Readers of Bourdieu will remember how, in order to destroy the binary opposition between art and society, he uses his theory of fields of production, arguing that artists are not fired by creative impulses *sui generis*, but owe what makes their art to the concrete possibilities available to them in their artistic field; and a given artistic field is defined by the competition between its players in conditions fraught not with high-flying imaginings about 'art', but with mundane obstacles.[6] Among these are financial constraints and the demands of the marketplace, as well as the imperative to be seen, distributed, accepted, and legitimated by the mechanisms of the field.

Bourdieu's selected fields of study are painting, photography, and literature, and he virtually ignores the theatre; but these mechanisms for the theatre would include the grants you manage to get, where you perform – venue as a measure of success – the number and kind of spectators attending, the length of your run, the reviews you receive, the spin-off effects for future jobs, renewed or new sponsorship, and so on: all of it socializing your work whether you will or no.

Bourdieu's argument is problematical in that, although conceding that art works cannot be reduced to the material conditions of their production, it essentially concentrates on the latter to the detriment of the works that are produced. However, performance works, albeit tangled up in the conditions in which they are made, are no less social for being greater than the sum of these conditions. (I should add that my concept of 'works' includes the supposedly non-hierarchical notion of 'event' prevalent at present.)

While this is not the occasion for developing my dialogue with Bourdieu, what I am suggesting is that Bourdieu's insights into the production nexus combined with the sociocultural semiotics of the kind I am proposing give a powerful method both for acknowledging and analyzing *works* without throwing them back into the sphere of art discontinued from society.

As you will have understood from these remarks, the second current of my research concerns the problematical relationship between works and their social contexts. The third, noticeable from my interweave, has to do with interdisciplinary approaches and how aspects of discrete disciplines known as sociology, political science, aesthetics, and so on, may converge for the study of performance understood as social and cultural practice. The fourth and fifth currents provide the direct subject matter of my lecture. The fourth concerns directors and companies working in Europe during the past thirty years, the present focus of my research being Lev Dodin and the Maly Drama Theatre, as already cited. In the Maly's case, the word 'process' and its emphasis on doing has another dimension, since my research includes the devising and rehearsal processes that shape the company's productions.

The Cross-over Genres

The fifth current of my research involves the cross-over genres characteristic of the last thirty years of performance, but which, irrespective of how they break borders and blow minds, still refer to the generic categories of 'theatre' or 'dance' – 'ballet' for a revolutionary figure like William Forsythe and 'Tanztheater' ('dancetheatre': the terms are merged) for Pina Bausch. Robert Wilson, too cute for words, calls all his works 'opera', especially those that are not sung.

Forsythe and Wilson, both American, are in themselves examples of cross-over – to Europe – insofar as Forsythe has created exclusively with the Ballett Frankfurt, not excluding their residency at the Châtelet theatre in Paris, but excluding choreographies commissioned by the Paris Opéra Ballet. His explorations, like those of Bausch, are subsidized generously by the municipal theatre system in Germany. Wilson was launched on a world scale by funding integral to the national cultural policy implemented by Michel Guy, Minister of Culture in France in the 1970s. Germany followed suit in the 1980s, providing him with state subsidies non-existent in the United States.

More details for the 1990s would stress the point drawn earlier from Bourdieu regarding the fundamental importance of infrastructures both for the operations of the field of cultural production as such and the ways in which practitioners take their position in it. The legitimation afforded by capital might be said to be a spur for trend-setting. It might also be said to be a guarantee of the symbolic capital accrued from being in the vanguard and setting trends – to the point where yesterday's trend-setter is today's canon.

My prologue – a prologue befits a person from a Drama Department – has come to an end, and is intended to give resonance to the words I am about to utter.

Networked Uncertainty

'Our modern age of uncertainty': thus speaks, for the late nineteenth century, one of Chekhov's characters in his *Play With No Name*. The play has this no-name of a name because it was found in a drawer after Chekhov's death in 1904 with its title page missing. It was thought to have been written when Chekhov was a twenty-year-old medical student, and to be based on an earlier draft authored when he was only eighteen. However, the term 'uncertainty' is not unique to Chekhov's time-place/space or chronotope, as Mikhail Bakhtin calls contained moments of history.[7]

It recurs at the cusp of the twenty-first century. For Bourdieu, for example, *our* age, not Chekhov's, is one of anxiety, insecurity, and above all of the precarity engendered by neoliberalism: the erosion of the so-called 'welfare state' through the politics of privatization, the cult of individual achievement at the expense of collective values, and increased competitiveness in the job market, including flexi-time which, Bourdieu maintains, is a source of especially pronounced precarity for women, immigrant workers, and a whole range of socially excluded groups.[8] Performers of one kind and another who are beset by job insecurity – now there's a form of flexi-time! – could well be counted among them.

The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman calls today's disintegration of structures the 'liquid' society.[9] Manuel Castells, on the other hand, theorist of cyberspace and of what he calls 'flows' – this is a buoyant variation of the metaphor of liquidity – calls it the 'network society'.[10] So radical, he argues, is the change in all areas of activity, and so far-reaching its consequences, down to the smallest details of everyday life – including the experience of uncertainty – that it heralds 'the beginning of a new age', described by Castells as the Information Age.

So radical was the change in Chekhov's Russia that his character might have said the 'age of uncertainty' would foster the Age of Revolution. Eric Hobsbawm would have corrected him by defining it as the Age of Extremes.[11] The broad sweep implied by the notion of 'Age' poses numerous difficulties, but I am using it as not so much a chronological measurement but an indicator of a perceived major value-shift.

How did Dodin deal with the idea of uncertainty – the cue for his production of *A Play With No Name*, premiered in 1997 after five years of intermittent rehearsals? Long rehearsal periods are typical of the Maly, especially as most of its productions are devised – usually from novels, which the actors perform from the first page to the last, narrative, descriptive, and expository passages and all, all of it on their feet. That is to say, they do not start from a script. They play, perform *études* and improvise, and, gradually, write the script physically with and through their bodies, as dancers do a choreography, since the script of the performance only comes into being from their play.

A Principle of Embodiment

The energy of the work comes from a phenomenal focus on each task at hand, from a commitment to search and research, and from a principle of embodiment by which the body inhabits every motion and emotion passing though it, and where body, mind, and spirit are one. And this is precisely why the work, when it becomes a work – a production – can stay in the repertoire for years on end and grow with the performers rather than atrophy into a thing. The fact that the

performers bring their own selves into the entire creative process means that they co-author the production. It remains theirs when in repertory because they continually bring fresh input into it, thereby ensuring its living quality of play; and the details of the production can, accordingly, change organically. The Québecois director Robert Lepage observes, with regret, that not having a repertory theatre in French-speaking Canada is like not having anything in the fridge.[12] Dodin could well reply that an empty fridge is better than one full of dead vegetables.

Dodin prompts and prods the actors, cuts and culls, and dismembers and reassembles scenes in a process of layering that frequently displaces the dialogue and events of the chosen novel, but which serves the performance work-in-the-making. This was the method used, for instance, for *The Devils*, from Dostoevsky's novel, during three years not of intermittent but consistent rehearsal and from whose nine hours of performance quietly percolated a devastating critique of power, manipulation, and control – in politics, certainly, but also in the routine transactions between human beings.

The production was prepared during the tail end of the Gorbachev period, when the mixed signals of *glasnost* and *perestroika* and the conflicts between nascent democracy and rooted autocracy could no longer hold. By the time the production was first performed in 1991, a communist coup d'état had led to the toppling of Gorbachev, and within a month the Soviet Union would cease to exist.

The Devils, which you may have seen at the Barbican as *The Possessed* in 1998, did not strive to be politically topical. Consequently, it did not attempt to embed its semiotic processes in the signs of the times, verbally or visually. The set, for example, was an abstract geometric design of pulleys and planks, and the minimalist costumes suggested, if anything, the 1860s of Dostoevsky's novel. Nevertheless, what the Dostoevskian voices said in the production, in largely tempered tones so unlike Dostoevsky's strident polemics, went to the heart of their characters' actions, the whole operating as an emblematic construction open to temporal and spatial shifts and, therefore, capable of addressing the present. This is why everything said and done in it has such a strong contemporary ring and why, eleven years later in 2002, it has not dated. It is worth observing that the socially responsive flexibility of meaning at issue here is quite different from Derrida's notion of deferral.

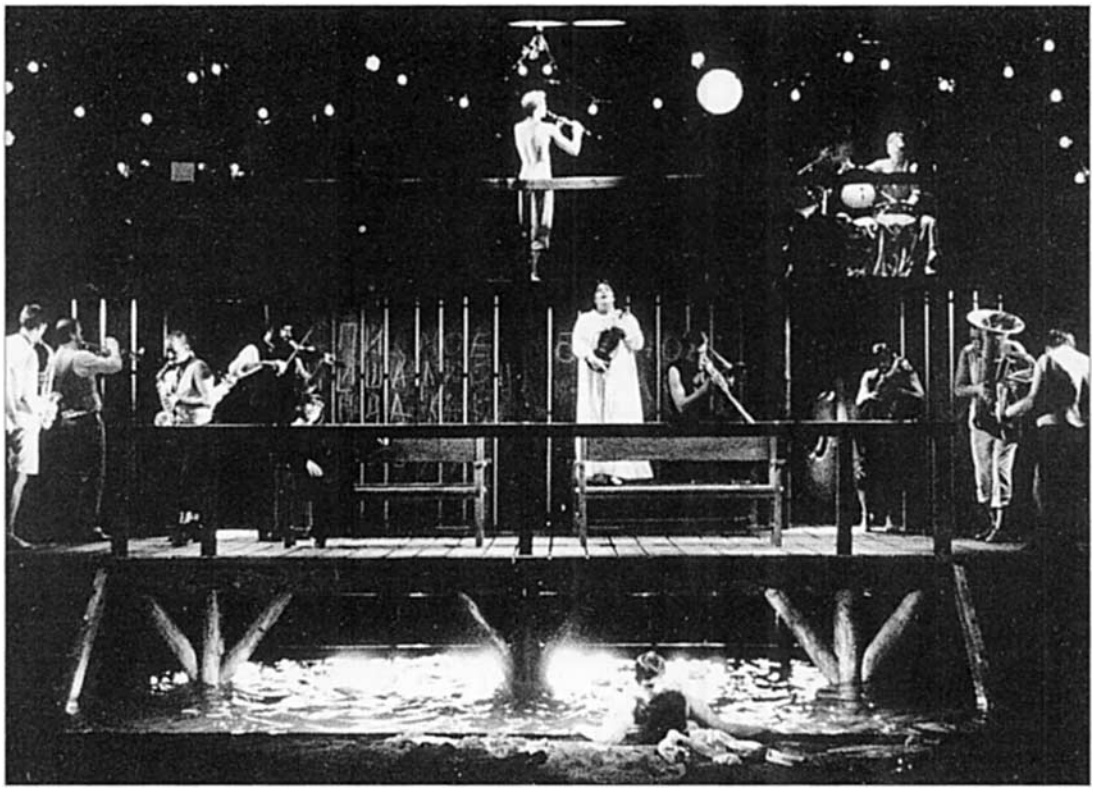
Dodin's 'A Play With No Name'

The Maly's devising method was used for *A Play With No Name*, which Dodin thought of as a novel: this rambling text is as long as *Uncle Vanya*, *Three Sisters*, and *The Cherry Orchard* put together. David Hare, who adapted it as *Platonov*, after the main protagonist, for the 2001 London production at the Almeida, faced the problems posed by it by 'stick[ing] as closely as possible to Chekhov's original structure and plan'.[13] The Maly was no less close to the bone for not sticking to them.

After variation upon variation, Dodin deleted nine of the original twenty characters as well as the subplots attached to them involving money, murder, and melodrama. Some sections were discarded only on the eve of the premiere. Meanwhile, he added ten of his actors who are skilful musicians to double as jazz players and servants. He concentrated on interlocked themes projected through Platonov's relationships with four women, among them his wife Sasha and his summer lover Anna Petrovna, who is financially ruined and will lose her estate.

The themes of destitution and homelessness carried by Anna link up notably with those of loneliness, abandonment, betrayal, anxiety, disaffection, and personal and social disintegration that are refracted by all the characters to a greater or lesser degree. But they are crystallized in Platonov who, according to one of Anna's moneylenders, 'typifies our modern age of uncertainty'.

The whole production catapults time forward from Chekhov. It takes 'our modern age' to refer to the turning point of the twenty-first century, all its themes defining the polyvalent notion of uncertainty that signifies what I have termed a major value-shift.



Playing in water. Lev Dodin, *A Play with No Name* (1997), Maly Drama Theatre of St Petersburg. Photo: Ken Reynolds.

Dodin finds for the 'age' the metaphor of water – a pool in which his actors play trumpets as they swim while their characters dive about in it for pleasure or in search of healing, suddenly jump into it in comic despair, or, in the case of Platonov, swim and swim, but nearly drown.

Pushing Back the Limits

For Dodin, as for Castells in a different context, what is specific to one society, when shared sufficiently by others, justifies the use of the collective noun 'society', which absorbs the plural 'societies'. We saw this with Castells's 'network society'. What is perceived through the production for Russia today has a similarly plural embrace. The world at large is caught up in the net where Platonov, who '*typifies*', is caught like a fish.

This presence of the world is conveyed, above all, by the production's extraordinary variety of music. The music is played virtually non-stop, now by these actors, now by others, sometimes accompanied by dance, and almost always playing simultaneously with dialogue. It covers ragtime, jazz, swing, cabaret songs, Russian Romances, such mid-century hits as 'Love's Last Word is Spoken', 'Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White', and 'Brazil', along with the more recent 'Libertango'. There is a quirky waltz by Shostakovich played at top speed on a piano and a fragment from *La Traviata* sung as a parodic duet. All of this and more makes *A Play With No Name* a vibrant, exciting piece through which runs the current of its potent, witty-humorous, tragic vision of the age.[14]

The challenge for the actors is immense as they go in and out of the water – water remaining in their ears, nose, and throat as they must speak, more often than not against the brass instruments or song. In this, as in other ways, Dodin obliges them to push beyond their presumed limits, as if the act of performing were limitless. He has this in

Dancing on carnations. Pina Baush, *Nelken* (1982), Tanztheater Wuppertal. Photo: Detlef Erler.

common with various practitioners in Europe, most notably with dancers and choreographers. Think of Pina Bausch, who asks her dancers to run up and down uneven slopes, leap, be caught (or not) by their partners, and fall in precarious positions, take risks with chairs (*Café Müller*, 1978), dance, yes, in water up to their shins (*Arien*, 1979) or in peat or turf (*The Rites of Spring*, 1975) or on carnations (*Nelken*, 1982), and dance not only until they literally drop, but, as in the case of the dancer dancing the sacrificial victim of *The Rites of Spring*, faint from the exertion of it at the end of the dance.

Bausch, more than Dodin, asks her dancers to push back their psychological limits while they go 'from the inside out', as she puts it, as if she were quoting Stanislavsky.[15] Dodin's performers dig into their 'inside', primarily their unconscious, to fashion an imaginary world, but their personal experiences are hidden behind their invention. Those with Bausch use their personal experiences – generally anxieties – as the very subject matter of performance. From this, among other things, come the *angst* and black humour of many of her pieces.

Many of her themes could be transpositions of the themes in the key of 'uncertainty' in *A Play With No Name*. And, although her compositions are to be distinguished from Dodin's in numerous ways, her working method, like his, also favours improvisation, experiment, trial and error – and a repertory company with fresh vegetables in the fridge.

Bausch's Ready-Mades

Some of this discernible cross-over between the methods of a choreographer and that of a theatre director also incorporates, in Bausch's case, her use of speech. In her 1997 *Der Fensterputzer* (*The Window Cleaner*), while a reference to Coca-Cola could be interpreted as a wry social comment, as in much of her work, over and above the status of Coca-Cola as an icon of global consumerism – globalization is part of the 'network society' – there is the associative link with Warhol and, consequently, with the aesthetics of the ready-made.

It is well known that Warhol owed a good deal to Marcel Duchamp's notion of the *objet trouvé*, the found or ready-made object that can be named 'art' or be re-adjusted to it. Little thought, on the other hand, has been given to Bausch's affinity with this aesthetics through what I call her *mouvement trouvé* – movements such as walking, washing, carry-

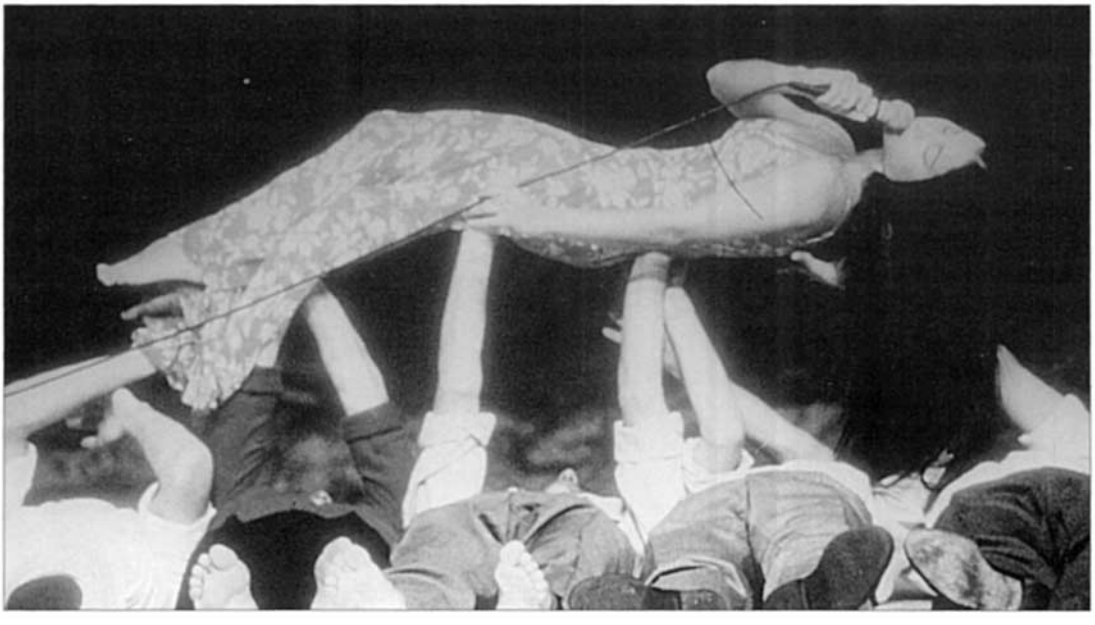
Pina Baush, *Masurca Fogo* (1998), Tanztheater Wuppertal. Above: the dancer (Julie Shanahan) dressed in red balloons. Photo: Francesco Carbone. Below: as performed at Sadler's Wells, 2002. Photo: Michael Rayner.

ing babies, caressing, kissing, smoking, and all sorts of less obvious daily movements from which she extracts the contours of her dance. Some of her most startling movements are startlingly precisely because the provenance of their contours is not easily recognizable. Objects are also ready-mades – chairs, cigarettes, balloons – whether or not they are used in the antagonistic situations between men and women that have been central to her work.

The red balloons dressing a woman in *Masurca Fogo* (1998) are popped one by one, thereby suggesting her 'object' status, while another woman elsewhere in the dance is manhandled as she croons into a microphone. Although the piece abounds with sexual skirmishes, it draws to an end with the harmonious image – new in Bausch's later works – of the dancers sleeping in gigantic blossoms projected onto a transparent screen, and which wave and close like plants beneath the sea.

Forsythe's Accidents

The cross-over in choreographic methods to theatre direction is just as pronounced in the choreographies of Forsythe – in his play with speech, certainly, but especially in how the dancers craft extended sections of the dance



William Forsythe, *Artifact* (1985), Ballett Frankfurt (as performed at Sadler's Wells, 2001). Photo: Dominik Mentzos.

on themselves instead of being crafted upon solely by Forsythe. The process, intensified in the 1990s, gives co-authored pieces very much as occurs at the Maly and, like Dodin with the Maly (although, in the theatre, this is not unique to Dodin), Forsythe builds 'finds' and accidents of rehearsal into the compositions.

The example that springs most obviously to mind is the unexpected fall of the fire curtain when the company was rehearsing *Artifact* (1985). Forsythe took up the accident, repeated it several times in the choreography (thereby throwing audiences into the dark and then back into the dance again), and has repeated it in other choreographies since, so much so that the event has become his trademark. The falling curtain in the middle of movement has special resonance for spectators in the know. Otherwise, the initial effect on them is one of uncertainty – 'What has gone wrong?' 'Why is the fire curtain falling?' – doubts that are dispelled by the repetition, by which time the falling, as well as the blackout, are part of the semiotic processes of the whole.

This is but one of many criss-crossed references made by Forsythe from one piece to another in his corpus. However, this intra-Forsythe semiosis, so like the intra-Dodin one, is not done for reasons of trivial reflexivity, any more than is the embodiment of their respective rehearsal processes in productions shown to the public. For example, Forsythe's 1988 *Impressing the Czar* intersperses the 'vertiginous thrill' of virtuosic

display with sections that show dancers walking about in their *pointe* shoes, one dancer fiddling with one leg on *pointe*, another trying steps, a third walking off, a group clustered together – as happens in a rehearsal studio.[16]

These fragments of working process are not designed as a postmodernist debunking of 'art' and its alleged hierarchical status, but as a corporealized reflection upon, and combat against, the 'thingness' of art to which I referred at the beginning; and as a combat *for* the exercise of agency, to which I have also referred, in a field whose principles of subordination, the antithesis of agency, is legion. Not for nothing is the ballet field compared to the army.

Inhabiting Space

Similarly, Forsythe's semiotic quotations of ballet are not for reasons of postmodernist pastiche, but for creating polyphonic depth and texture garnered for the purposes of a *new* form of ballet. Hence the way the dancers completely inhabit the space by the audacity of movement and configuration, sharpness, dizzying speed, tension of speed, precarity of *pointe*, imbalance of the body and, yes, deformity of the body, and by their presence that comes from the total focus of being right *there*. Light enhances the corporeal and spatial dynamics; architectural shapes accentuate the physical dangers run by the dancers (thus *Limb's Theorem*, 1996); costumes sculpt movement. Thus, the semioses of classical ballet – its techniques, variations (*pas de deux*, and so on, as, for instance, in the 1988 *In the Middle Somewhat Elevated* or the 1995 *Eidos: Telos*) and the ensemble precision of the *corps de ballet*, and all the rest inherent in the balletic culture – instead of being a matter of control, are a liberating experience for the dancers insofar as their superlative technique transcends technique to achieve freedom of form and of being. At the same time, all this, usually in full-length evening pieces, highlights the theatricality of the dance and links dance again to the theatre.

Speech in Forsythe, as in Bausch, is provocative in a traditionally non-verbal art. When they first began to use it, the field of dance, to paraphrase Bourdieu, had not incorporated this disposition, had not built up outlook and expectation along these lines on the part of dancers and audiences and with-