

Reflections on the Art of Big Dance Theater
by Tere O'Connor

Under the direction of Annie-B Parson and Paul Lazar, Big Dance Theater has generated a rich cache of theatrical invention in its productions over the last twenty-five years. The deep affinity of their group for the history of dance and theater is palpable in the range of pan-historical, pan-cultural sources employed in their work. The aesthetic for each work is defined partly through the specific sources engaged, but there is also an overriding aesthetic that exists independent of each piece. It shows up in design elements such as hair, music, costumes, and set, but it is arrived at through a commitment to assemblage and a deeply imagined sense of alternative place, rarefied, but successfully woven into all of their productions. It could be described as a domesticated bohemia where androgyny is an assumption and where the characters exude a pre-industrial presence even as they inhabit a sophisticated technological realm of video projection, sound, and light.

This poetic branding is an important precondition of all their work. As a rule, each piece takes a text as its catalyst. Sources are chosen from the theatrical canon and from the work of the most inventive writers working in theater today including Sibil Kempson, *Ich*, *Kürbisgeist*, and Mac Wellman, *Antigone*. Parson and Lazar have sourced films like Agnès Varda's *Cléo de 5 à 7* in their *Comme Toujours Here I Stand* and Greek theater with Anne Carson's translation of Euripides's *Alkestis* in *Supernatural Wife* and her *An Oresteia* for the group's *Orestes*. They have worked with the writings of Chekhov as well as the stories of Japanese novelist Masuji Ibuse. Out of these diverse sources flows a theater of image and poetry unlike any other. At its center one feels a two-pronged goal: the forging of new forms with a critical eye on the production of meaning in theater and the creation of poetic anomalies unsullied by commentary.

Certainly the work has progenitors. Big Dance Theater takes cues from the Wooster Group whose massive redefinition of theater is felt by anyone creating performance work in New York from the 1980s until today. Lazar worked in a number of the Wooster Group's productions. The layering of diverse texts and source material, so deftly wrought by the Wooster Group into transformational art, already reflects a choreographic ideology if one can agree to a definition of choreography positing that it sets into motion unrelated phenomena on the forward rush of time. Big Dance corrals these concepts into its own realm, focusing on the choreographic as a governing principle to create its theatrical constellations.

Big Dance Theater incorporates various media in its work in a truly organic way. Video is a very strong and inventive presence, used to extrapolate and reinvent and to create tangent, fantasy, or atmosphere in the work. Dance, music, theater, technology, and writing are all interdependent here. Although the work is inherently interdisciplinary and cannot be placed in one category, two very

powerful strains of choreography are still apparent. The first is the creation of a unique syntax of time for each piece and the ability to unleash its power on the imagistic surface of the work. With their collagist hand, they constantly interface other time frames into their work. Unruly, poetic applications of the interruptive are employed; elliptical and fleeting, they wage a battle against the omnipresence of the episodic.

Subterranean elements like rhythm, structure, quality, and memory play are activated with great acuity. The relational sequencing of diverse sources and procedures brings definition here, moving us in and out of tangles of meaning. Due to deftly applied quick shifts in the manipulation of physical material, a state of constant re-contextualization is achieved in the works, creating new sequential couplings that redefine what we have just seen. This constant erasure and accrual reconstructs time, with no effort made to reconcile narrative lines set forth, nor to explain the unfettered systems that allow for such structural fury. The text is placed on equal ground with all other elements, creating an entirely different portal for the audience to enter the material. It floats in the atmosphere, yet the unique structures lure us off scent of the narrative bone.

The other aspect of choreography so delightfully woven into the oeuvre is the use of “dances.” All of the works coalesce into dances at various points throughout the performance. These dances, half dressed in a naïf style, perhaps born of the overriding aesthetic, refer to a human desire to dance that resides outside of other considerations. The dances are made up of simple but very well chosen movements that ride on deceptively “un-simple” rhythms. They are exquisite gems used to equalize all the characters for a moment or to create transition or sometimes to complete a theatrical landscape. The dances often occur structurally at the end of a willfully anemic crescendo. The actors gather, shuffling into place like a family beckoned to play cards in the other room after dinner. When the dance collects it doesn’t reach the bombastic peak of a crescendo but offers a more humble dynamic realm, exacting and soft. Often in the work theatrical convention is undermined at the structural level. There is a de-emphasizing of theatrical grandeur at times that might be born of a feminist perspective, this in addition to the overarching focus of Parson and Lazar on power differentials. One of the strains of all the works is the tacit quest for power that everyone seems to be vying for. Each character has a moment of coming into prominence usually to recede again into the background. In these dance moments, however, everyone lets go, even dropping character. As the dances progress people begin to opt out and the dance disintegrates, reintroducing us back into the work. It is one of the many destabilizing modes in which the character merges with the actor to put us into in-between spaces.

In addition to the imaginative and masterful direction of the works there are the performers – excellent all – across whose bodies various strains of character, abstraction, persona shift, and super-specific acting styles are applied. They must dance and sing and convincingly produce both very real and then cartoonish

melodramatic moments. The shift between these two is very powerful. Often for a production they study very specific speech patterns from one reference or another. Gender is fluid and shifts unselfconsciously between men and women – the bodies that represent male and female and something in between. Everyone is top-notch but there are four members over the years who have anchored the work and reinforced the aesthetic. They are Tymberly Canale, Molly Hickok, Paul Lazar, and Cynthia Hopkins.

Tymberly Canale possesses movie-star looks and starts most shows as a stock character ranging somewhere between ingénue and leading lady. She is usually transformed early on by receiving or doling out some malevolence that sours her innocence and also expectations regarding generic female roles. She performs her dualistic presence in such a measured way that one never knows where she'll settle. She is also an accomplished dancer who galvanizes the troupe in its terpsichorean efforts.

Molly Hickok has the charisma of a Broadway star – you go to her when she enters but there is an editorializing glint in her eye. She has played many roles created through layered source procedures, notably King Admetus in *Supernatural Wife*. The selection of a woman to play the role of king brings us to a commentary on Greek theater and it attaches to the voice of the translator whose muscular writing is so excellent. But it is also a poetic choice in line with the rest. One of the strains of drama that lingers through all the work is an atmosphere of failed power, a sense that a despot has just left the country and the performers exist in the aftermath. Molly's performance is knowing and deep. She moves from the stylistic to the hyper-real effortlessly, her only disguise a mustache.

Paul Lazar embodies the fumbling man who keeps his dignity in check by living far from the truth. He plays a range of beings but maintains these qualities, which pervade much of his amazing work. Preternaturally lovable, his serious dramatic moments are all the more searing for his emotional transparency. He is somehow emasculated but without a sense of ridicule. It is the atmosphere of androgyny; so subtle but crucial in this work. His characters are so inventive they live on the cusp of reality and dream.

And of course there is Cynthia Hopkins, of the golden voice. This person is so committed to every moment on stage that we do not even know when she is pulling us into the mire of absurdity. Her ability to “become” other is astounding. Among her many acting talents, her voice is used so richly. Often she embodies the voice of a powerful, foolish man, for example, a World War II propaganda film announcer. Increasing in intensity and drone, it pervades the space and becomes truly frightening. She is a veritable transformer, and her character switches are braided into the deep structures of the work.

For some writers and academics it remains common practice to designate any performance occurring from the 1970s through today as postmodern. This

overused catchall title has been summoned to describe Big Dance Theater's work as well. Yet, to truly appreciate the operations of this group and the resultant art works, it is constructive to look beyond postmodernism with its overly congratulatory view of pastiche and fusion. These elements can be seen as organic steps in the forward progression of any creative mind coming to terms with converging histories. Big Dance Theater's layered productions are fueled more by a natural collision of the multiple forms they practice. The critical stance of Parson and Lazar is embedded in the nuanced choices they make instead of being brandished across the work as content. It is alive in the subtle admixture of the disparate references they braid together. They reconfigure expectations regarding the temporal outlay of theatrical works with their structural subterfuge. Time itself becomes an unlikely agent of Brechtian alienation. Given the current penchant for the "political" in contemporary art, it is refreshing to find artists whose product is not quite so overt. If they are political, it is that they use their work so unfailingly as a method for processing the conditions of life. Crafting such mercurial constructions, they offer multifocused, ever evolving points of entry into the works resulting in a unique kind of theater capable in its expansiveness of absorbing the cultural paradigm shifts that occur so fast and so frequently in the twenty-first century.

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