

Jonathan Burrows' Keynote Address for the Postdance Conference in Stockholm, Sweden

*Curated by André Lepecki for MDT and Cullberg Ballet, Stockholm, Sweden*

October 14th 2015

---

Good morning and welcome.

André Lepecki suggested to me that this Postdance Conference

was an opportunity to find time and space

(and he underlined time and space)

to reflect on the developments and forces that have shaped choreographic imagination

from the 1960s up to today,

and when I saw the underlining of time and space

I felt the terrible weight of the choreographic

and the task ahead of us.

How do we talk about this recent history of dance?

How might we recognise the present?

Or imagine what might happen next?

What do you want to hear?

What could I possibly say?

History is a straight line but my body disagrees,  
there's stuff in my motor memory still thinks it's 1978  
and my body isn't good with dates,  
or aesthetic arguments,  
or what's in or out of fashion.

I'm trying to work out how to approach this  
without academic certainty  
and at the same time without nostalgia,  
but I need the thought of the academy to keep me steady because my body can't be trusted,  
and nostalgia comes and goes  
as always.

This talk is pretty much subjective for want of a clear picture,  
and to see what my body might think about history, in relation to future, if I risked to ask it.

And it turns out I have a lot of steps in me going way back  
and some of them are in fashion and some of them are very suspect,  
but my body is remarkably unprejudiced against these patterns  
and throws them up old against new with a steely logic that I try not to trust.

And it turns out the nostalgia gets swallowed up in movement  
and everything seems equal when you dance.

It's a hard-hearted art form when it comes down to it,  
and you think of the time it takes to figure anything out  
and the speed it takes to date itself shortly after,  
and then thinking how far ahead that dated stuff will sit in your muscles,  
and you're on your death bed and your legs are still thinking about sub-Cunningham dance routines.

Judson for my generation  
was contact and release techniques,  
the women's movement and improvisation  
and back then nobody talked much about Trio A.

To watch Trio A you had to wait in line at the New York Public Library  
and be passed a U-matic videotape through a hole in the wall,  
which you watched with headphones on  
in front of a TV set in a crowded public room.

It was so exotic.

Meanwhile a lot of what passed into our bodies came through a kind of osmosis  
that flowed from dancer to dancer,  
and everything seemed possible and unburdened by historical proof.

I went to the Dartington Festival in England in 1980 or 1981

(as I said before, my body's not so good with dates)

and I ended up by accident in a recreation Steve Paxton made of Satisfyin Lover

and it never occurred to any of us we were walking through an icon,

it was just something we shared in a workshop festival,

and he liked the ones who laughed

because embarrassed laughter seemed a more straightforward response

and afterwards there was a disco.

And when Ramsay Burt showed me his collection of Judson films

I said 'But this looks more modern than postmodern' and I thought of Merce Cunningham,

and I wondered about the moment after Judson

when all that soft intelligence emerged in the 70s which we thought was Judson but wasn't quite,

though we based our idea of Judson on it,

mainly because it was the same people

ten years after and into something richer and stranger,

which looked and felt postmodern and somehow fed everything,

and is in danger now of being eclipsed by the juggernaut of iconic, archival Judson in grainy black and white.

And I can understand that a younger person might think Trio A was always visible, up there on YouTube,

but at the time we had to take Sally Banes' word for it.

And it seems like she and others called Judson post-modern partly because it came 'after modern dance',

and on the other hand the expression got caught up with the actual philosophical term

which confused things for years,

and afterwards anything vaguely pedestrian got called postmodern,

and then to confuse things more we eventually started to read postmodernism

and it was easy to think then that what we were doing had always been actually postmodern

and maybe it was.

I've no idea really, I can't remember what I thought I was doing or watching

or what anyone else thought they were doing.

I heard there was a reunion at Judson a while back

and Simone Forti said the problem was that nobody had ever rejected Judson,

and I have to say in some ways it does look weirdly like Judson is still the future,

and it's hard to work out what the consequences of that might be.

In the 80s Judson was just the recent past that had opened a gate

and the future hadn't yet been pinned to any kind of historical past perfect moment.

Because our bodymind doesn't work like that,

it's a more anarchic thing really and won't be held down by hierarchies of knowledge.

We're more like the movement equivalent of those TV programmes about people who hoard junk  
and mostly we don't want the mess tidied,  
and even if we did there's no disentangling Trisha Brown from a Michael Jackson video,  
because our motor memory sorts according to movement similarities,  
which is a curse and a blessing and the source of our work.

And Ramsay Burt talks about 'the disinterested mode of performance'  
which he says is the dominant mode,  
and I know what he means and what it feels like,  
and I got to noticing recently when I use it and when I don't  
and I use it mostly when I feel I should be more contemporary.

As in 'contemporary dance',  
which has been contemporary for the last 50 years,  
which makes it slightly hard for us to locate the present,  
let alone the past,  
or the opportunities ahead.

And at the same time my performing-self recalls other ways to engage  
and suggests them to me with quiet resolution,  
and as an act of resistance,  
against the idea that the contemporary could be so easily represented

by a particular kind of walk,

or a pair of plimpsolls.

Because all the time dance is busy

stripping away and then reclaiming the messiness of everything the body might throw up and indulge,

in which battleground the queer, the folk, the pop, the trash, the burlesque, the black, the kitsch, the street and the vaudeville

are constant casualties and occasionally triumphant victors,

and long may they also thrive

regardless of that construct called the contemporary,

because the future contains all of it.

Or as Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker said to an early group of P.A.R.T.S. students,

'Why would you want less?'

This is subjective,

this is a mess,

because that's how the last 50 years felt on a cellular level,

which is our great strength and a blessing,

however hard it might be to figure out what's really going on.

Robert Cohan, dancer with Martha Graham and founder of London's first modern dance company,

came to watch a rehearsal of his old dancers and as he left he turned to me and said,  
'Jonathan, this is a room full of people who still think dance has meaning',  
and I looked and he was right and I wasn't quite sure what to make of all that.

And the possibility that dance might have meaning still hovers,  
at cellular level,  
or at least one might say that many of us experience an occasional moment of guilty expression,  
that rises like a ghost and must be contextualised.

And the location of the meaning has shifted  
from the body to the theatre to the spectator  
but it feels the same when you feel it  
which is why most of us like to dance.

I went to Boris Charmatz' Musée de la Danse at Tate Modern  
and I thought 'These are my people',  
and I thought 'I don't care where they do this but a gallery is as good as any other place so long  
as they keep on doing it',  
and it made me wonder what it was they were doing and whether it was old or new,  
and it seemed to defy exact placement and I thought maybe that is what we're doing,  
to somehow keep occupying these spaces that can't be easily identified but live in the body  
and can be activated anywhere,  
and as much as we worry that we should be more popular,

nevertheless we enjoy this place of privileged deviancy that pulls people in,  
and has nothing to do with history but is about defiant and intelligent becoming.

And I don't believe in 'in the moment'

but I'd hate to see the cult of archiving sit down like an elephant on our pragmatic forgetfulness.

And I'd hate to see the machine of Facebook

make us stupidly forgetful,

so we can only tolerate what happens in a day

and must throw everything else immediately away,

including ourselves,

and our friends,

and the work that we love,

and need.

So I started writing a list of all the dance artists still alive

and still making work,

whose work I love,

and need,

and it got longer and longer and I kept writing

and I was going to read it out to you,

and I was going to end the list with the ones I missed

saying you, and you, and you, and you,

and you, and you, and you.

And some of them were making work 50 years ago

but they don't feel like history,

not at a cellular level.

The problem is we keep staring at the past 50 years

to try and reassure ourselves what we're doing is new,

and we forget we have this thing called a body

which hasn't changed much in the last 150,000 years,

which is a pretty special place from which to resist all this,

And anyway the cult of the new drives uncontrolled consumerism

which is one thing we should and can be resisting.

And everything is new at the point of performance if you want it to be.

We keep staring at the past 50 years to reassure ourselves what we're doing is new

but as the artist Grayson Perry said about painting,

since there is no new you end up searching for a nuance,

a tiny variation you can make your own,

and most of the nuances are already taken.

50 years ago there weren't many of us and we all knew everyone

but there are thousands of us now

and we're all searching for a nuance,

and the market loves a niche product

but it all feels a bit unsustainable.

And it's up to us not to bow to this destructive machine

driven by networks of producers

at the mercy of a marketised cultural scene,

but rather to cherish what we pass through and what passes through us

and to create our own agenda for the next 50 years,

which honours the history in our bodies

and leaves room for the mess that emerges

and the humanity,

reinvented with each generation

and looking nothing like the past.

This is the start of the Postdance Conference,

which is a special challenge thrown out that gets to the heart of the matter,

meaning at the end of this 50 years we find ourselves a little unsure whether we want to dance at all anymore.

Which doesn't mean we don't like to dance,

just that we're not sure quite where to go with it.

And we've invented the term 'post choreographic field',

and we're all camped out there under the stars

while we work out what it means,

which is tricky.

And Hans-Thies Lehmann and Helene Varopoulou wrote a fantasy letter to Brecht

for Tom Plischke and Katrin Defeurt's 'New Epic Theatre' event,

and the letter said we should resist the 'temptations of the neo-Baroque',

and I thought ah, but this baroque describes exactly that ornamentation which is fundamental to dancing,

and contains all our rhythmic detail felt intensely at cellular level

that opens worlds and worlds and changes everything.

And I thought how do we refuse this Sun King thing

so rightly critiqued here,

and how do we assert and reclaim again that radical and necessary joy we feel

when we juggle our synapses in a play of detail that circumnavigates all concrete meaning

and yet makes the most sense?

Because as Deborah Hay pointed out

to dance is always a political act.

And here in Stockholm 14 years ago,  
Mårten Spånberg's Panacea Festival  
seemed like the birth of something new we now call conceptual,  
which was a thinking mess  
and only afterwards became history,  
which mess we might seize and celebrate  
and not call conceptual  
or post-post conceptual,  
but rather some kind of a new way to deal with how we see and what we see and what matters,  
whether dancing or not,  
for which the term dramaturgy is somewhat inadequate and professorial,  
and which shift of perception is the real revolution.

That we got smart to re-contextualise all the mess the body overwhelms us with,  
and overwhelms the audience with,  
and so stepped lightly aside from the usual heavy handed attempts to solve this art form called  
dancing  
that most of us would rather get up and do.

And meanwhile the university dance departments proliferated  
alongside the spread of choreographic studies,  
which are a curse and a blessing,

and universities profit from the courses and poke at them to become more billable  
and to turn out the employable  
which is an ongoing battle,  
and as I said before things got more crowded,  
but a lot of us have also found shelter there,  
and time and space  
and a culture to sustain us,  
and the boundaries are getting more fluid  
and the old fence is falling.

And the passing of Pina Bausch has left us the question  
what might tanztheater be in the 21st century?

And the passing of Merce Cunningham has left us the question  
what chance for abstract dance in the 21st century?

And the Atlantic Ocean stayed where it was  
and people made work either side of it  
and remained somewhat sceptical of each other  
and a little nervous around questions of origination.

And hip hop turned virtuosity into a political act  
and crossed all the continents

and found its way slowly into our collective motor memory.

And rave culture set the world alight with dancing  
and the media and the politicians thought it was to do with drugs  
but it was a folk dance gone global.

And women artists have continued the fight to be visible  
and black artists have continued the fight to be visible  
and disabled artists have continued the fight to be visible  
and older artists have continued the fight to try and stay visible.

And artists with so-called disability  
have shown us exactly how limited our idea of ability is.

And as Jérôme Bel says,  
YouTube has become our first library,  
which changes everything but we don't really know how yet.

And the future is virtual and also not virtual.

And we fight to survive  
the death of the author  
and the rise of the curator

and her friend the spectator  
hiding at the back  
to avoid becoming a somewhat reluctant participator,  
and the outside eye paid by the producer,  
and the onward march of marketing and markets  
and that asset stripping exercise called a funding application.

And all the economic consequences we must also discuss,  
and digest,  
and conquer.

And a younger generation has arrived out of all this  
and invented their own means of distribution,  
collectively, below the market, beyond consensus,  
socially active,  
intelligent with institutions,  
refusing the iconic  
and post-nothing at all but only present,  
because they had to.

All of which has not gone unnoticed by art galleries  
who've made beautiful virtue of those qualities in our art form we've always been ashamed of,  
like the flimsy, forgettable nothingness of it all,

which is nice so long as we resist them telling us their spaces are the best  
and then marginalising half of what we do  
(because why would you want less?).

Or lending us Biennale models  
that can marginalise people after a five year career  
and we all lose out  
to the old hyper-capitalist chasing of the new.

Because history goes sideways in the body  
and overlaps itself  
and more or less ignores fashion  
or the official timeline.

And as I said before, all this is 150,000 years old at a conservative estimate  
so there's no real rush.

This is a ramble in the woods  
with a guide who can't see the wood for the trees,  
and every tree is always almost somewhere  
which is the best place to be.

We're always almost somewhere and the best pieces never quite arrive

leaving us thinking ahead to what might happen next.

Leaving us thinking ahead to what might happen next

and never more than in a 4 hour performance,

or a 24 hour performance

(because why would you want less?),

or a 24 minute performance.

And we're always almost somewhere slowly

and the best pieces never quite arrive

but remain imminent,

which is where I'll leave you,

just here,

beautifully critical but passing through,

here today and gone tomorrow.

Thank you.

With grateful thanks to Ramsay Burt, Katye Coe, Mette Edvardson, Sue MacLaine and Chrysa Parkinson for help and advice on the subtleties of it all.

© Jonathan Burrows 2015

---

---

Biography:

Jonathan Burrows danced with the Royal Ballet for 13 years before leaving to pursue his own choreography. His main focus now is an ongoing body of work with the composer Matteo Fargion. The two men are co-produced by Kaaitheater Brussels, PACT Zollverein Essen, Sadler's Wells Theatre London and BIT Teatergarasjen Bergen, and are currently in-house artists at the Nightingale Brighton. Other high profile commissions include work for for Sylvie Guillem, Forsythe's Ballett Frankfurt and the National Theatre, London. Burrows has been an Associate Artist at Kunstencentrum Vooruit in Gent, Belgium, London's South Bank Centre and Kaaitheater Brussels. He is a visiting member of faculty at P.A.R.T.S Brussels and has also been Guest Professor at universities in Berlin, Gent, Giessen, Hamburg and London. 'A Choreographer's Handbook' has sold over 8,000 copies since its publication in 2010, and is available from Routledge Publishing.