Chapter 4

The Body in Dance

Introduction

This chapter is concerned with western dance forms and theatre dancing in particular, in contrast to the dance cultures of ‘others’. In order to set the scene for what is to follow, it begins by offering an alternative anecdote to the first ‘body story’ presented in Chapter 1.

In the early 1980s I taught courses on the sociology of the body and dance to undergraduate and postgraduate dance students in a contemporary dance institution. As indicated in Chapter 1, neither of these topics could be described as operating within the mainstream of sociological or dance discourse during that time. It will be recalled that the talk on the body in particular seemed to provoke some students in sociology to act in atypical ways in the lecture setting in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The responses of the dance students, almost a decade earlier, were quite different. From the start, they were generally fascinated by the body talk, although they found some of the ‘sociological’ concepts overly theoretical and constantly tried to ground them in ‘bodily’ practice. As dance students, of course, they were routinely engaged with their bodies in a highly reflexive way, through their daily classes and through performing. Perhaps it was their bodily attentiveness that facilitated their interest and ease in discussing everyday bodily practices as well as dance. As students of dance they would have been exposed to developments in postmodern dance in the USA and the rising new dance or the independent dance movement in Britain, which challenged the traditionally received notions of dance as a theatre art.

In 1983, I participated in shooting and editing a video that documented the making of a dance work from rehearsals through to performance, which was choreographed by an MA dance student. Mundane everyday movement, like that under consideration in the course I taught, had gained currency in certain quarters of a burgeoning contemporary dance sector. Pedestrian movement was also central to this dance and the dancers rehearsed in coloured sweatshirts and tracksuit
Twenty years earlier in the same institution, only ‘regulation’ black leotard and tights with black cardigan could be worn on the dance floor and the task would have been to transform everyday movement into dance movement, not celebrate the former in and of itself.

What was also striking in the lecture/seminar setting with dance students was the fact that these students were very much at ease with both their own bodies and those of their fellow classmates, with whom they often sat in close physical contact. Touching and overlapping bodies were not an uncommon sight. This would have been unusual in a more standard academic context, even among individuals who knew each other quite well. Another striking feature was the fact that although the students would start off sitting on chairs, there was a tendency over the course of the session for rather more than a few to gravitate to the floor. From there they might stretch out their legs in second position and extend and lower the torso forward to the floor between the legs, stretch out the spine, rotate the shoulders, or generally move about to avoid stiffening up. It was also quite usual for students to peel off or add on various layers of jumpers or scarves during the session.

In contrast to the bodily ‘interference’ of the sociology students discussed in Chapter 1, the dance students treated their actions as ‘business as usual’. That is to say, this was ordinary routine behaviour for these students in a lecture/seminar context. The gravitational pull to the floor, the sporadic ‘not-everyday’ movements, and the putting on and taking off of items of clothing could be disconcerting for the academic unused to giving lectures/seminars to dance students. The lecture/seminar format, as we have seen, operates on the principle of the mind/body dichotomy, the idea of which is to engage the brain and keep the body under wraps. The uninitiated academic could easily interpret these aforementioned bodily actions as interfering with or countering that aim.

Although I had been a dance student many years before, my first encounter with mobile dance students in a lecture setting was unsettling. I recall thinking that they could not be ‘really’ listening to what was being said if they were constantly stretching and flexing their bodies and taking off and putting on layers of clothing in a decidedly visible manner. It soon became clear that they were indeed listening with and through their bodies. Their taken-for-granted mode of lecture/seminar behaviour was soon accepted by this teacher too as ‘business as usual’, unlike the bodily disruptions and eruptions of the sociology students discussed before. It was almost as if the movement memory of the teacher, a habitual form that was lost but not entirely forgotten over the years of becoming an academic, was brought back into play.