

Found in Translation: Language Gesture Voice

Essays on Praxis

By Shabari Rao and Kumudha Chandrasekaran

Introduction

Found in Translation is a set of two performed essays that foregrounds praxis in dance. The theory-practice divide in dance is a reality, to be faced and addressed in creative ways. 'Dance' in a dancer typically tends to be over-emphasised, leading to a totalising view of practice as purely physical. Conversely, compartmentalising theoretical knowledge purely as a demand on the intellect, disrupts the continuity between thought and action. Eric Bredekamp (1994) in his work *Reconstructing Education Psychology*, discusses the 'passive spectator approach' to knowing, which is viewed as separate from doing. He proposes that such an approach makes theory impractical and practice atheoretical, impoverishing both.

Found in Translation takes off from the critical questioning of what constitutes practice, and brings together the thinking and doing in dance, through dance. Praxis, embodying a concept or theory learnt, forms the spine of this work. Revisiting fundamental ideas forms a canvas, and questioning forms the strokes, in this exploration. Utilising a common framework of Practice, Perception and Philosophy, this project is designed as triads and discusses Language, Gesture and Voice in one essay, and Repertoire, Improvisation and Unlearning in the other. These essays are an attempt to contextualise and articulate questions that are important to address collectively, as a community of practitioners, to develop a shared, nuanced and evolving understanding of praxis in performance.

Language Gesture Voice

This essay investigates language, gesture and voice. It begins by briefly introducing what we mean by these terms and defining the scope of use for this essay. We then move onto unravelling relationships and connections between the terms to unpack the complexities that exist as we see them. We end the essay with a set of questions that aims to provoke further discussion.

Language

'Language' is a much-studied subject; so, for the purpose of this essay we will limit ourselves to a very small segment of language that we find particularly interesting and relevant to our inquiry of language in dance. Beginning with a very short, working definition of 'dance as language', we simply want to highlight that 1) dance communicates meaning, and 2) it has a grammar, syntax and vocabulary, that is, a structure. Before proceeding further however, it bears considering that dance as a language does not translate directly into textual language (Bannerman, 2014). Thus, movements are not placeholders for words.

The central point of interest in the understanding of dance as language, is how this language can both provide as well as deny access. For example, it may be argued that dancers from two different styles might not be able to access the entire context and meaning of the other style. Yet there is a shared experience of movement itself that can be tapped into to create a connection. Even if a viewer has no dance language that they are familiar with, there is still a basic familiarity with the body in motion which provides a fundamental access to dance. Of course, the more depth of experience one has in working with movement and the body, the more nuanced the ability to make sense and understand that particular form of communication.

Therefore, it can be argued that, when one knows the language being used, one has access to specific meanings, but when one is unfamiliar with the language, the specific meaning might be inaccessible, but the potential for more individual and poetic interpretations emerges, which is after all the intent of art!

Gesture

A gesture could be anything from a shrug of the shoulder to the flick of a wrist or the opening of a fist. It appears so trivial. Something small and seemingly insignificant. Perhaps even simply ornamental. An unnecessary distraction. Yet when we begin to strip communication of gesture, it tends to become characterless, without dynamic and flavour. Gesture plays a key, but sometimes invisible role. At times a simple gesture changes the course of an interaction. And at other times a gesture can appear hollow. Therefore, 'gesture' is like salt in a dish, its significance is noticed only in its absence.

Gesture, in a form such as Bharatnatyam, is something that is relied upon to communicate meaning in the absence of words and is commonly understood as a detailed language of the hands. In contemporary dance, gesture is understood as a movement that does not involve any shift in the weight of the body. The gesture can be made by any part of the body: a foot, an elbow, or the eyes; so long as there is no shift in the weight of the body. In Bharatanatyam, where gesture is a complex codified language and in contemporary dance, where it takes a more abstract form, it still nonetheless adds nuance and depth to the dancing. Although it might seem that 'gesture' in these dance forms refer to different things, perhaps they serve a similar role in both - that of supporting and enhancing communication.

Voice

The dancer's voice starts as a skill, develops as expression and transforms into one's individuality. However, a dancer's individual voice is diminished in the pursuit of dance, owing to a performative expression of solidarity and uniformity mandated by existing structures. Nevertheless, as a dancer develops their own voice, there may be situations where they need to add their voice to amplify a collective agenda; as well as situations where they need to abstain. Thus, developing an individual voice requires the dancer to also cultivate a sense of responsibility of when to add and when to abstain.

When we talk about voice, silence can't be far behind. Silence could come from ignorance, complacency or indifference; or it could come from empathy. Our perception of dance could lead us to a silence where there seems to be nothing to talk about, or a silence coming from not wanting to change things for various reasons, or a silence from wanting other voices to be heard. Be it a euphoric, proverbial or empathetic silence, it is important to identify if it is triggered from the surrounding or from the self.

Silence could come from a place of power and privilege, conversely a strong voice could come from a place of compulsion or despair. Irrespective of voice or silence, it is the agency to make a choice that matters. Perhaps then, with silence or a voice

one can amplify an ideal, own one's truth or pass the mic, without having to make the same choice every time.

Relationship between Language and Voice

The relationship between language and voice is assumed to be quite obvious; especially when it comes to spoken language and literal voice. You need a voice to be able to use language. It's as simple as that. The voice is yours, personal, and the language is universal.

The relationship between voice and language, when considered in the context of dance, opens up for a more nuanced understanding. Here 'voice' is not literal but a metaphor; and language is not verbal, but physical. Existing languages of movement are sometimes inadequate for the articulation of a particular set of ideas and one might have to develop a language of one's own or expand upon an existing language.

However, the nature of language in movement does not limit meaning to the literal, therefore even when a language is not completely or immediately familiar, it can still be accessible.

Voice and language can, and often do, develop together. As one's ideas get clearer, one is able to find ways to better articulate them; and as one begins to articulate the ideas they become sharper. In such a case, the voice of the author/dancer and the language used become co-dependent, each shaping and being shaped by the other.

Relationships between Language, Gesture and Voice

Language, gesture and voice work together to create meaning; to add nuance, depth, and texture to communication. The emphasis, repetition, inflection and timing of a word takes it from flat to resonant and therefore meaningful. For example, the tone of voice can be thought of as 'gesture' where the way in which you utter a word communicates more than the meaning of just the word. Gestures have an emotional component that simple language might lack. Therefore, while one might understand a language, one might miss the nuance in meaning beneath the words; or possibly understand the intent without getting the literal meaning.

'Communication' becomes 'meaning' in relationship. The success of communication depends not just on the one communicating, but also on the one receiving the communication. However, it is in this liminal space where both mystery and misunderstanding can occur!

Summary of Questions

If language brings the vocabulary, gesture brings the animation and voice brings agency, what happens when gesture, language and voice do not complement each other? What gets lost in translation?

Meaning making is achieved by both what is expressed and how it is received. How could we use gesture, language and voice in a way that does not complicate, but instead complements each other, such that the communication creates connection?

The choice of language and gesture has the potential to provide or deny access. How do we take communication that is individual and personal in the choice of the gesture and language used, and make it universal through the voice that expresses and projects it?

Reference List

Bredo, Eric. "Reconstructing educational psychology: Situated cognition and Deweyian pragmatism." *Educational Psychologist* 29 (1994): 23-35.

Bannerman, Henrietta. "Is Dance a Language? Movement, Meaning and Communication." *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2014, 65–80.

Found in Translation: Repertoire Improvisation Unlearning

Essays on Praxis

By Shabari Rao and Kumudha Chandrasekaran

Introduction

Found in Translation is a set of two performed essays that foregrounds praxis in dance. The theory-practice divide in dance is a reality, to be faced and addressed in creative ways. 'Dance' in a dancer typically tends to be over-emphasised, leading to a totalising view of practice as purely physical. Conversely, compartmentalising theoretical knowledge purely as a demand on the intellect, disrupts the continuity between thought and action. Eric Bredo (1994) in his work *Reconstructing Education Psychology*, discusses the 'passive spectator approach' to knowing, which is viewed as separate from doing. He proposes that such an approach makes theory impractical and practice atheoretical, impoverishing both.

Found in Translation takes off from the critical questioning of what constitutes practice, and brings together the thinking and doing in dance, through dance. Praxis, embodying a concept or theory learnt, forms the spine of this work. Revisiting fundamental ideas forms a canvas, and questioning forms the strokes, in this exploration. Utilising a common framework of Practice, Perception and Philosophy, this project is designed as triads and discusses Language, Gesture and Voice in one essay, and Repertoire, Improvisation and Unlearning in the other. These essays are an attempt to contextualise and articulate questions that are important to address collectively, as a community of practitioners, to develop a shared, nuanced and evolving understanding of praxis in performance.

Repertoire Improvisation Unlearning

This essay investigates repertoire, improvisation and unlearning. It begins by briefly introducing what we mean by these terms and defining the scope of use for this essay. We then move onto unravelling relationships and connections between the

terms to unpack the complexities that exist as we see them. We end the essay with a set of questions that aims to spark further discussion.

Repertoire

A repertoire forms an important part of the identity of a dance form. Beyond the ritual and reach, it is perhaps the historicity of the repertoire that keeps it alive in spirit and relevant as content. A repertoire from a certain stream, Gharana or a Baani, is knowledge preserved for its heritage and passed on with pride in the lineage. However, a repertoire could be perceived as limiting or as a lack of freedom. The comfort of a solid ground, afforded by repertoire, allows for a firm stance. Yet, if the repertoire is fixed material, how much of it should be fixed and how much of it should be material? Material for experimentation and growth, to ladder up to a better view. Anne Hogan (2014) suggests that negotiating a fine balance between "conferring heritage and embracing innovation" is key. Against the bad rap that it typically carries, the repertoire then becomes a crucible to experiment and a canvas to frame individual choices.

Improvisation

A significant characteristic of improvisation is that one doesn't know what is going to happen next. There is an element of surprise. You surprise yourself and your audience. In the words of Ruth Zaporah (1995) it's like walking backwards - you can see where you have come from, but you don't know where you are going next. Improvisation at its simplest can be thought of as joining the dots. How many dots are there to work with, the sequence or the lack of it, and the route that one chooses to take between each dot will reveal the shape of the improvisation. Sometimes it is useful to have many dots that are precisely numbered to be able to trace an exact pattern. At other times it is useful to have very few dots with no sequence which allows a lot of space for exploration. Lois Hetland (2020) suggests the term 'optimal ambiguity' as a way of deciding between lots of dots or very few dots.

A challenge to improvisation, however, is that it can be considered lazy, because there are no rules, and whatever is done is acceptable. Here the question then becomes about rigour in improvisation and about how it can be precise, sharp, and detailed while still maintaining the spontaneity that it is known for.

Unlearning

Unlearning is a process that always occurs in relation to that which has been learnt. It is sometimes a deliberate and reflexive process that grows out of learning, and at other times new contexts or conversations can be the catalysts for unlearning. Whether unlearning is an internal impulse, or triggered from an external place, it is the learning that fundamentally informs the unlearning. In the process of unlearning, one makes conscious and informed choices about what the learning means, how it can be used, and what is no longer relevant. One is then no longer bound by structures and uses of knowledge that have been handed down, rather one can make the knowledge their own. Therefore, unlearning is a very personal journey where each of us takes ownership of our learning and the choices that we make from there.

Relationship between Repertoire and Improvisation

There is often a perceived tension between repertoire and improvisation, as if one undermines or denies the value of the other. Improvising fixed material or fixing improvisation is seen as diluting the authenticity of each form of expression. A repertoire is not simply material that is precisely choreographed, but also the passing on of a legacy, and therefore there is a desire not to mess it up with the whim and fancy of every practitioner. Conversely, improvisers hold the authenticity of the moment as sacred and would like nothing from the past to tamper with it. But what if we were to explore how improvisation and repertoire form a dialectical relationship, where each can benefit from and nourish the other. Improvisation that is authentic could create aliveness in a repertoire set generations ago. Similarly, fixing certain parameters in an improvised material could bring specificity and clarity to it. This could then bring new perspectives to existing practice.

Relationship between Repertoire and Unlearning

In any dance form with a repertoire that has been coded and established over decades or possibly centuries, there is a need to earn a creative licence to make it one's own. Mastery of a fixed repertoire is often a way to gain that creative licence as a dancer, but in the process of building the focus that is required to master the

repertoire, one often loses sight of possibilities beyond, that could be revealed through the lens of unlearning.

Unlearning then may be viewed, not as a rejection of one's repertoire, but as an essential deepening of the process of learning. The repertoire forms a ground that does not bind but forms a scaffold, to build one's learning and growth.

Summary of Questions

If repertoire is seen as fixed and improvisation as fluid, can a dialectical approach to repertoire and improvisation enrich practice and engender creativity?

The quality of transference in repertoire is valuable. Yet it can also be experienced as restrictive. In what ways can unlearning make the process of transference of a fixed repertoire generative?

The content of a repertoire is fundamental for the growth of a dancer. Can improvisation provide a means through which a repertoire can be further honed through unlearning?

Reference List

Hogan, Anne. "Beating the bad rap: Ballet technique and/as somatic practice.". Royal Academy of Dance. *Focus on Education*, vol. 8, 2014, pp. 1-8.

Hetland, L., Sheridan, K., & Veenema, S. (2020). Beyond the Lab: Influencing Practice and Policy. *Empirical Studies of the Arts*, 38(1), 42–51.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0276237419868947>

Zaporah, Ruth. *Action Theater: the Improvisation of Presence / Ruth Zaporah*. North Atlantic Books, 1995.