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The democracy of dance

System to collaborate on choreography allows dancers to put own stamp on movements

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SUSAN WALKER
DANCE WRITER

Much lip service is paid by choreographers to the concepts of collaboration with the interpreters, and democratizing the creative process. But the truth is most choreography is generated by the choreographer and handed to the dancers to perform.

Limited resources in the dance community don't allow for extensive workshopping and joint creation. Nor are there widely acknowledged procedures for working this way.

But Michael Trent, artistic director of Dancemakers, has engaged his dancers in a theatrical system of training and creation called Viewpoints, and applied it to the re-creation of a 2004 show of his, *things in between*, with results he finds thrilling.

In the 1970s, Mary Overlie, a New York performer, choreographer and teacher, developed Six Viewpoints as a system to be applied to dance or theatre for teaching, creation, improvisation and analysis. She deconstructed theatrical practice into six categories: space, story, time, emotion, movement and shape.

Anne Bogart, a New York theatre director and co-founder of Saratoga International Theatre Institute (SITI), refined Overlie's approach for the theatre, establishing nine Viewpoints, grouped under the general heading of Time (tempo, duration, kinesthetic response, repetition) and Space (shape, gesture, architecture, spatial relationship, floor pattern). Two years ago, she and co-author Tina Landau published *The Viewpoints Book: A Practical Guide to Viewpoints and Composition*.

Toronto theatre director Jacob Zimmer was introduced to Viewpoints while studying at Simon Fraser University and later went to SITI to do a composition course with Bogart.

Viewpoints, he says, is "A great training vocabulary. In the theatre it has to do with a liberation from standard naturalism or American method acting. It (embodies) the freedom of post-modern dance."

People who have worked with Viewpoints say it gives the performers a way of talking about what they're working with and opening up the possibilities of any given phrase or gesture. "You can just say, "Can we think of spatial relationships for a second?" and everyone knows what you mean," says Zimmer. One practitioner described it as developing a collective unconscious.

Viewpoints is quickly picked up by those performers with good improvisational skills. Adoption of the process, Zimmer says, "does lead to a more authentic feeling, because the performers generated the material. They're not just doing what they're told. The sense of ownership over the work is crucial and somehow visible."

There's a sense of newness in each performance, Zimmer reports, even where the work is very precise or formal.

Trent organized a two-week workshop in September for his company members and some other members of the dance community, inviting Zimmer to help conduct the sessions.

Opening the season this way, says Trent, allowed him and his dancers - Kate Holden, Benjamin Kamino, Steeve Paquet, Clinton Draper, Kate Hilliard - to get to know each other much better. And it gave them an opportunity "to develop a level of discourse and how to talk about work and about creating work together."

What was going to be a simple re-mount of a piece he did in 2004 at the Enwave Theatre became, under the influence of the Viewpoints sessions, a reconstruction of *things in between* from the ground up. Bogart's process, says Trent, "is around allowing room for the people creating and performing the work to be alive and in the moment as much as possible."

The original theme of *things in between* remains: "a need for intimacy in a world of dissolving boundaries." Trent was trying to articulate in dance the paradoxical loss of human connections in a world where cultural and geographic boundaries are disappearing. Too much openness breeds distance.

Working with the Viewpoints principles, the choreographer was clear about how he was going to

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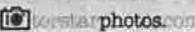
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get the dancers' "instincts, their impulses and their voices inside the work." In the creation period that began right after the Viewpoints workshop, he asked the dancers to come into the studio with "the kitchen phrases." These movements would be "very mimetic, personal phrases they created where they had to literally recreate what they did in the first 10 minutes after they got out of bed in the morning."

The kitchen phrases became the basis for a construction project, in which the dancers worked with the material applying the Viewpoints tools to develop what Trent calls the architecture of the piece.

"You keep adding on and subtracting. It's like a puzzle. You find the moments that resonate and the moments that don't and you abandon what doesn't work. Eventually this world starts to come into focus and that's the really exciting part of the process."

For dancer Kate Holden, the only performer who was in the 2004 show, working with Viewpoints has wrought a totally new work in terms of movement. "It's a very specific way of breaking it down so we can talk about each element very specifically. And all the movement is very personal to each dancer. That's been the big development: you see people's individual dynamics coming through. It's been great."

The final stage of creation is a week-long residency in the theatre where the work will be performed, with video artist Jeremy Mimmagh and lighting designer Andy Moro working hand and hand with the choreographer and performers. "So it's a real creative process rather than me simply going here's the piece, light it, or put the video on top of it," says Trent.

He's pretty pumped about what might evolve out of this new way of working, as the re-shuffling of *things in between* continues and the final shape of the dance becomes crystallized, bearing the individual traces of all its performers.

Just the facts

What: things in between

Where: Dancemakers Centre for Creation, 55 Mill St., The Cannery, Bldg. 58, Studio 313

When: Nov. 14 - 17 and 20 - 24 at 8 p.m.; Nov. 18 and 25 at 4 p.m.

Tickets: \$22 @ 416-367-1800

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