

Godwits, Kuaka and the Returns of *Ausdruckstanz* in Aotearoa

Carol Brown

‘All that one can do is proceed inside this tear, vibrate at the borders of memory’.¹

Dunedin, 1979

I am standing on the bare wooden floorboards of the Studio for Modern Expressive Dance, Moray Place, dressed in shorts and a t-shirt. A large sepia poster on the wall reveals a younger version of my teacher, Shona Dunlop MacTavish, doing a dramatic jump and wearing Cossack-styled boots, a fur hat, peasant blouse, and knee-length breeches. Her legs are in a deep flexion beneath her torso and her arms are raised strongly above her head in a moment of elation. She appears impossibly high off the ground. Another woman, with high cheekbones and wearing a long full-dress with mutton sleeves and a headscarf, is doing a high leg kick in the air with a flexed foot beneath her. The image captures their suspension at the height of vertically thrust movements. They are complicit and exalted. This highly ‘staged’ moment is set ‘outside’, against bush and sky and beneath towering gum trees. The overtly European motif suggestive of Central European folk dance is sited in a scene of bucolic Australian bush. The words read: ‘The Famous Bodenwieser Viennese Modern Expressive Ballet’ and ‘First N. Z. Tour’.

Aotearoa New Zealand is a collection of islands in the southern Pacific Ocean that has historically been peopled by waves of migration and influence beginning with the first peoples of this place, *tangata whenua* (Māori for ‘people of the land’), and subsequent European, Asian, Pacific Island, and other peoples. From where I write, Tāmaki Makaurau (Auckland), a volcano-strewn isthmus that lies between the Waitemata and Manukau harbours, I am surrounded by sea. Shorelines are places of contact and conflict and these shores resonate with the influence of distant and local bodies.

Tāmaki Makaurau, 2013

It is late February, nights are getting cooler and days shorter, nature’s signals are telling the wading kuaka, the bar-tailed godwit birds that fly from the Arctic tundra to spend summer in

¹ A. Heathfield, ‘Writing of the Event’, in J. Christie, R. Gough and D. Watt (eds), *A Performance Cosmology: Testimony from the Future, Evidence of the Past*, London: Routledge, 2006, pp.179.

New Zealand, that it is nearly time to go. As migratory shorebirds their flight path, from the northern hemisphere Arctic tundra to the New Zealand coastline, is one of the longest migrations known amongst birds.²

Within the performing arts environment, the kuaka or godwit has become a metaphor for the migratory movement of New Zealand artists between hemispheres. The flight of dance artists from Aotearoa to the northern hemisphere is a long-haul migration that is as much about opportunities to perform, study and experience dance within metropolitan centres of Europe and America, as it is about gaining what is anecdotally termed OE (overseas experience). Movement between hemispheres and across oceans — the north and the south, the Pacific and the Atlantic — as well as what is carried between poles, has been formative in shaping New Zealand's history and culture, both through the achievements of our self-imposed cultural exiles and through those who have returned to share and disseminate their knowledge and experience on these shores mixing and blending it with knowledge of this place.

In this writing I consider the continuing influence of European tanztheatre in Aotearoa, New Zealand, through a series of movement forms and patterns learnt in the studio of Shona Dunlop MacTavish that I recognize as persisting in my own choreography, dancing and teaching. In discovering my body-as-archive through a line of descent that tracks flight paths between Vienna, Sydney, Dunedin, London, and Auckland, I am interested in exploring the transmigration of an embodied legacy of *ausdruckstanz*. As the manifestation of a diasporic culture (the exodus of Central European Jewish artists and intellectuals from Europe before the Second World War), such a legacy can be seen to contribute in an ongoing way to the networks of relations, connections and dynamic patterns of flow between hemispheres, continuing to release movement potential for reimagining the present.

My earliest knowledge of dance as an art form was inscribed through a series of quotes from the past, for it was the Viennese *ausdruckstanz* choreographer, Gertrud Bodenwieser (1890–1959), whose words and movement principles animated my dancing. I came to know Gertrud Bodenwieser through the teachings of her former student and principal dancer, Shona Dunlop MacTavish, with whom I studied in New Zealand from 1972 to 1985.

² N. Oliver, 'Kuaka, the Bar-tailed Godwit', 2005, <http://www.nzbirds.com/birds/kuaka.html> (accessed on 23 February 2013).

Dunlop MacTavish occupies ‘a distinguished position in the history of Australian and New Zealand dance’.³ Born in Dunedin, godwit-like, she left in 1935 with her mother and brother to pursue the kind of arts education that was at the time perceived as only possible in the cultural capitals of Europe. Arriving at Bodenwieser’s private studio in Vienna she described feeling frightened, awkward and excited, however, ‘the energy and passion of those flailing bodies, quickly assured me that here was a sort of dance I had dreamed’.⁴

Individualism, unconscious expression and the communication of emotion underpinned *ausdruckstanz*, making this genre something of a challenge for shy schoolgirls raised in the Pakeha suburbs of Dunedin where overt expression was not encouraged. The experience of Vienna and Shona’s encounter with Gertrud Bodenwieser proved to be transformational. As Bodenwieser’s position as an avant-garde Jewish artist in Vienna became untenable following the *Anschluss* in 1938, she contacted Shona and her friend Hilary Napier and invited them to join her company. In 1938, Shona boarded a train with the *Tanzgruppe* (dance group) Bodenwieser as part of an exit strategy out of Austria, into Colombia where the company toured for the best part of a year. So began the displacement of Bodenwieser’s work and teachings from its cultural milieu and the urgency of survival in exile. As the company looked for a new home, Shona and her family suggested New Zealand and arranged visas for the company. After a brief pause in Wellington, the company however chose the more cosmopolitan city of Sydney, and in 1939 joined some of Gertrud’s other dancers who had arrived there via New York with the J. C. Williamson revue. Following this migration, as J. W. Marshall explains, Gertrud Bodenwieser became ‘amongst the first expatriate European dance artists to establish ongoing dance companies within the region’.⁵ Shona continued to work with Gertrud in Sydney until 1948 when she married a Presbyterian minister, Donald MacTavish, whose first mission was to China. Although she continued to pursue her dance interests through their various postings in Taiwan and South Africa, as well as through the birth of three children, it was not until Donald’s death in South Africa in 1956 that she returned to Dunedin to establish her own school of modern expressive dance. Out of this school grew the Dunedin Dance Theatre in 1963. This company,

³ J. W. Marshall, ‘Ausdruckstanz, Faith, and the Anthropological Impulse in Europe and the Asia-Pacific: A Critical Analysis of the Career of Shona Dunlop MacTavish’, *BROLOGA* 37, 2012, p. 31.

⁴ S. Dunlop MacTavish, *Vienna Dance: Memories of the Thirties and Bodenwieser: Personal Papers*, Dunedin, New Zealand, n.d.

⁵ Marshall, ‘Ausdruckstanz’, p. 31.

comprising Shona's senior dancers, was a platform for her own choreographies, often with political themes such as *Hunger* (1970), *Requiem for the Living* (1980) and *Bars* (1983), as well as re-creations of some of Gertrud Bodenwieser's repertoire, including *Dämon Machine/Demon Machine* (1923) and *Joan of Arc* (1947). It also became the crucible for the emergence of a number of dancers who would go on to have significant careers as innovative performers and choreographers in their right, including Michael Parmenter, Simon Ellis (UK/NZ), Matthew Smith (NZ/Europe), and Bronwyn Judge.

The wave of influence from Gertrud Bodenwieser and land-locked Vienna, Austria, 18,000 km away, was spread through Shona's teaching and transmission of that legacy to hundreds of dance students who trained in her dance studio in Dunedin.

Though after leaving New Zealand in 1985, I subsequently learned from many other teachers through different genres and styles of practice, I have maintained a continuous connection with Shona and her teachings and continue to periodically return to Dunedin to dance with or for her. Alongside my studies with Shona, I have engaged in a sustained practice of archiving and re-enacting elements of Bodenwieser's teachings and choreographies through research, writing and performance in dialogue with other former Bodenwieser dancers, including the late Bettina Vernon, Hilde Holger, Evelyn Ippen, and Hilary Napier.⁶

As a Pakeha artist-scholar of Irish descent, I recognize in this archival drive a resistance to historical amnesia and the erasures of historical events. As an Austrian Jew, Bodenwieser's artistic legacy virtually disappeared from Europe after she was forced to flee from Vienna. The convulsions of Nazism, the holocaust and the Second World War eradicated much of the evidence of her work and reputation and led to the diasporic exile of both her and her surviving dancers. It is in Australia, where Bodenwieser settled with her remaining dancers in 1939, and to a certain extent New Zealand, that one finds most evidence of her choreography, teaching and life, and where she is still remembered in the works of those influenced by her. Shirley McKechnie has described Gertrud Bodenwieser's impact upon Australian dance as, 'profound

⁶ C. Brown, 'The Stylistic Contribution of the Work of Gertrud Bodenwieser to the Ausdruckstanz Movement', in P. Grayburn (ed.), *Gertrud Bodenwieser 1890-1959*, Surrey: University of Surrey, 1990, pp.14-18. C. Brown, 'Migration and Memory: The Dances of Gertrud Bodenwieser', 1999, <http://www.pcah.us/m/dance/migration-and-memory.pdf> (accessed on 8 May 2013).

and long-lasting'.⁷ Yet her distance from Europe and North America made this legacy largely invisible outside of Australia. Shona Dunlop MacTavish, as one of the dancers who fled Vienna with Bodenwieser to Colombia and eventually Australia (via Wellington, New Zealand), described how the experience of exile and survival created an aura of protectiveness around Bodenwieser's work, the reverberations of which were felt by her students and dancers. For instance, she recently expressed how the dancers would huddle around Bodenwieser whenever she received bad news such as the arrival of a cable confirming the death of her husband, the theatre director Friedrich Rosenthal at Auschwitz.⁸

To engage in genealogy involves recognizing the inscriptions and embodied legacies of the past in the present. The concept of the body, as an archive of memories and inter-corporeal presence, has a particular resonance within New Zealand where for a Māori person the ability to position oneself through an order of relations generates a sense of the world centred on one's whakapapa or genealogy. Through whakapapa, Māori trace their ancestry all the way back to the beginnings of the universe. By means of oral retellings of whakapapa both the seen and the unseen that shape the world and one's position within it are understood, re-membered and evoked.⁹

Given this context, I am interested in how Pakeha New Zealanders negotiate their performance identities through embodied legacies of the past that extend beyond these shores. In particular, how movements and habits acquired in one cultural milieu (Vienna in the 1930s) become translated, adapted and reconfigured within another (Dunedin in the 1970s and Auckland now). This attention to the past and to acknowledging the diverse genealogies of presence in my own practice is in part a response to a post-colonial drive to acknowledge *how we are here* as situated and nomadic subjects with histories that affect our inhabitation of a multi-cultural present.

In this *dancing-place*, I connect with a genealogy that bridges the tanztheatre of Viennese ausdrucksstanz choreographer, Gertrud Bodenwieser, with the dance theatre of Dunedin-based

⁷ S. McKechnie, 'From Gertrud Bodenwieser to Meryl Tankard', *Ballett International/Tanz Aktuell*, 11 November 1996, pp. 37–39.

⁸ S. Dunlop MacTavish, Personal Communication with the Author, Dunedin, 3 January 2013.

⁹ R. Taonui, 'Whakapapa – Genealogy', *Te Ara — The Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, 2013, www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/whakapapa (accessed on 2 May 2013).

New Zealand dancer and choreographer, Shona Dunlop MacTavish, and my own practice as a choreographer and dancer now based in Tāmaki Makaurau, Auckland.

What happens to movement when it takes root in another place other than its origins? What is the generative force of memories, affects, and archives of feeling and gestures? What is the potential in creating an interweaving, a reconciling and a complicating of the past with the present, the distant and the near, the Antipodean and the European? This genealogy of practice, perhaps, resonates with that of many who experience their dancing as a form of inter-corporeal remembering that traces and tracks embodiment through multiple sites, languages and places, each with their distinct cultural histories. I would like to consider how a recovery of the terms of Bodenwieser's teachings from Vienna might constitute an archival refraction, simultaneously transforming past, present and future and recreating the plenitude of the temporal in its sensual dimension.

The following is a lexicon of remembered forms I was taught in the studio of Shona Dunlop MacTavish in Dunedin that relate to Viennese *ausdruckstanz* as developed by Gertrud Bodenwieser in Vienna in the 1920s–1930s. These are forms that continue to circulate in my own practice as a teacher, choreographer and dancer through modes of transmission:

breath

It starts with the breath, breathing into the space between the tailbone and the pubic bone and in a wave-like motion filling the interior of the torso so that the movement is carried by breath and heart. Breath 'animates the life of the torso, in which the heart — age-old symbol of love and pain — is embedded'.¹⁰

wellen

Both legs in deep parallel plié as you hinge back, the hips initiate an outward thrust leading into a full back bend, extend upward as the feet push into the floor, sense the spine moving like a wave, an arc from tailbone to head and through to the ends of your hair, performed as a sequential movement with the arms simultaneously reaching backwards then drawing up and over the head to suspend balancing on the balls of your feet in a concave shape.

¹⁰ G. Bodenwieser, *The New Dance*, Sydney: Rondo Studios for Marie Cuckson, 1970, p. 81.

impuls

A sudden movement initiated through the diaphragm and sequencing through the shoulders and head. The *impuls* gives dynamic accent to movement and can also be a trigger for initiating movement that develops sequentially from this source.

ekstasis

Thrusting sternum forward, arms back in strong purposeful open movement, arching head backwards and opening mouth through a silent cry — a moment that takes you outside of yourself, projecting a depth into the outside.

die spannung

A sense of tension and tone that is distributed throughout the entire body; a sense of suspense and an intensification of sensation.

As a dancer-choreographer living in the present, I take on a composite identity. There is still something of Gertrud Bodenwieser and Shona Dunlop MacTavish in my movements, but there are other movements belonging to other bodies, the bodies of the dancers I have collaborated with, the bodies known and unknown but witnessed and nudged against in the studio, on the street, in the witnessing of an event, in a photograph, in an image held in the bones. It is in working through these differences, between the 'I' and the 'not-I', between present and past, that the writing of movement occurs. Though at times I continue to think in an originary way as though Bodenwieser was somehow *the mother of invention*, I recognize that she is part of a backstory, something hidden from view but there, a co-presence but not a co-author. This attention to the past is neither a form of identification nor a cross-generational signal of desire for authentication and the fixing of a tradition; it is an inherently unsettled experience of the body as an archive of affects.

The Re-Turns of Ausdruckstanz in Aotearoa

Through this writing I have considered the fragile status of the body-as-archive and the palimpsest of genealogies of presence with specific instances of ausdruckstanz in Aotearoa. André Lepecki, in response to a perceived 'archival turn' within current performance research and practice, has suggested that the re-enactment of dance works from the past derives neither

from a ‘failure’ to remember nor a melancholic nostalgia. He proposes the potentiality of revisiting past work for its not-yet-exhausted creative possibilities. Rather than re-enacting a work to fix its historical relevance or pay homage to the originality of its author, Lepecki proposes an unlocking, a releasing and a playing out of what is held in reserve within source materials from the past. Such an approach allows us to witness how the present is different from the past. This marks what G. Deleuze describes as ‘a kind of displacement by which the past is embodied only in terms of a present that is different from that which it has been’.¹¹

Within the context of an urban Pacific city such as Auckland in the twenty-first century, the relevance of teaching dance forms that recreate the figurations of Central European Modernism of the 1930s must be questioned. However, if we address the movement of dance and dancers between New Zealand and Europe as a form of transmigration of influence in both directions, rather than a hegemonic dominant culture imposing its cultural authority on a parochial peripheral culture, we can begin to address this power dynamic differently. Given the virtual disappearance of evidence of Gertrud Bodenwieser’s artistic legacy in Central Europe, and the sustained presence of this in Australia and New Zealand through the ongoing influence of her students and dancers, it is to this part of the world that archivists now look for the affective traces of her work and influence. As part of the German project ‘Source Code’, in January 2013, I visited the studio of Barbara Cuckson (herself a former student of Shona and Gertrud) to assist Jochen Roller in the recreation of Bodenwieser’s final dance-drama before her death. ‘Source Code’ is an online archival repository dedicated to Gertrud Bodenwieser. It makes available the historical documentation of Bodenwieser’s work to an international audience — photos, letters and interviews with surviving dancers including Shona Dunlop MacTavish — linked to the recreation of her last dance-drama work, *Errand into the Maze* (1954), filmed in Sydney in January 2013.¹²

The re-turns of a legacy of Central European modern dance in this context might be considered less about the body as an archive, than the potential for movement between bodies, places and histories. Returning to the image of the kuaka or godwit who moves between

¹¹ G. Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, H. Tomlinson and B. Habberian (trans.), New York: Zone Books, 1991, p. 71.

¹² J. Roller, ‘The Source Code: An Online Project’, 2013, <http://www.jochenroller.de/english/content/sourcecode.html> (accessed on 23 February 2013).

hemispheres, it is this instinctual journey of survival to have one's needs met that sustains the flight. For it is the pattern of this movement, rather than the material body, that persists between generations and is encoded in the bird's DNA. As Lepecki states, 'dance is not only that which passes away (in time and across space) but also as that which passes around (between and across bodies of dancers, viewers, choreographers) and as that which also, always, comes back around'.¹³ Like the kuaka, godwit, it returns.

As I explored a lexicon of movements from the past with a group of contemporary dancers in Sydney we asked: Does something of a distant place–time persist in the rippling action of the spine, *die welle*, in the openness of the pelvis as a leg circles in a horizontal arc, *die beinkries*, in the circular movement of arms whipping above the head, *die schlinge*? How might performance evoke the affective traces of past habitations and signal both a continuation and a displacement with the past? What new material might arise at this juncture between past and present? And when we fly, godwit-like across hemispheres, what traces remain of our dancing in the movements of others?

3 Kenneth Myers Centre, Auckland CBD, 18 Feb 2013

I am in the studio with three dancers all of whom have very different movement histories to my own. We are exploring the movement patterns of long-finned eels, tuna, a native species of eel for a site-responsive work, *1000 Lovers* for the Auckland Waterfront and the White Night as part of the Auckland Arts Festival 2013. We try moving through our spines in a sequential wave-like motion undulating from tail to head and from head to tail. I take the dancers to the bar to practise the deep backbends or, *wellen* that I associate with the Bodenwieser–Dunlop embodied history in order to find this movement and I tell them her story.

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¹³ A. Lepecki, The Body as Archive: Will to Re-enact and the Afterlives of Dances, *Dance Research Journal*, 42(2), 2010, p. 39.

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