DANCE THEATRE JOURNAL

volume 14 no. 4 1999 £3.50/USA $5.00

THE VOICE OF DANCE

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Unpacking the Body

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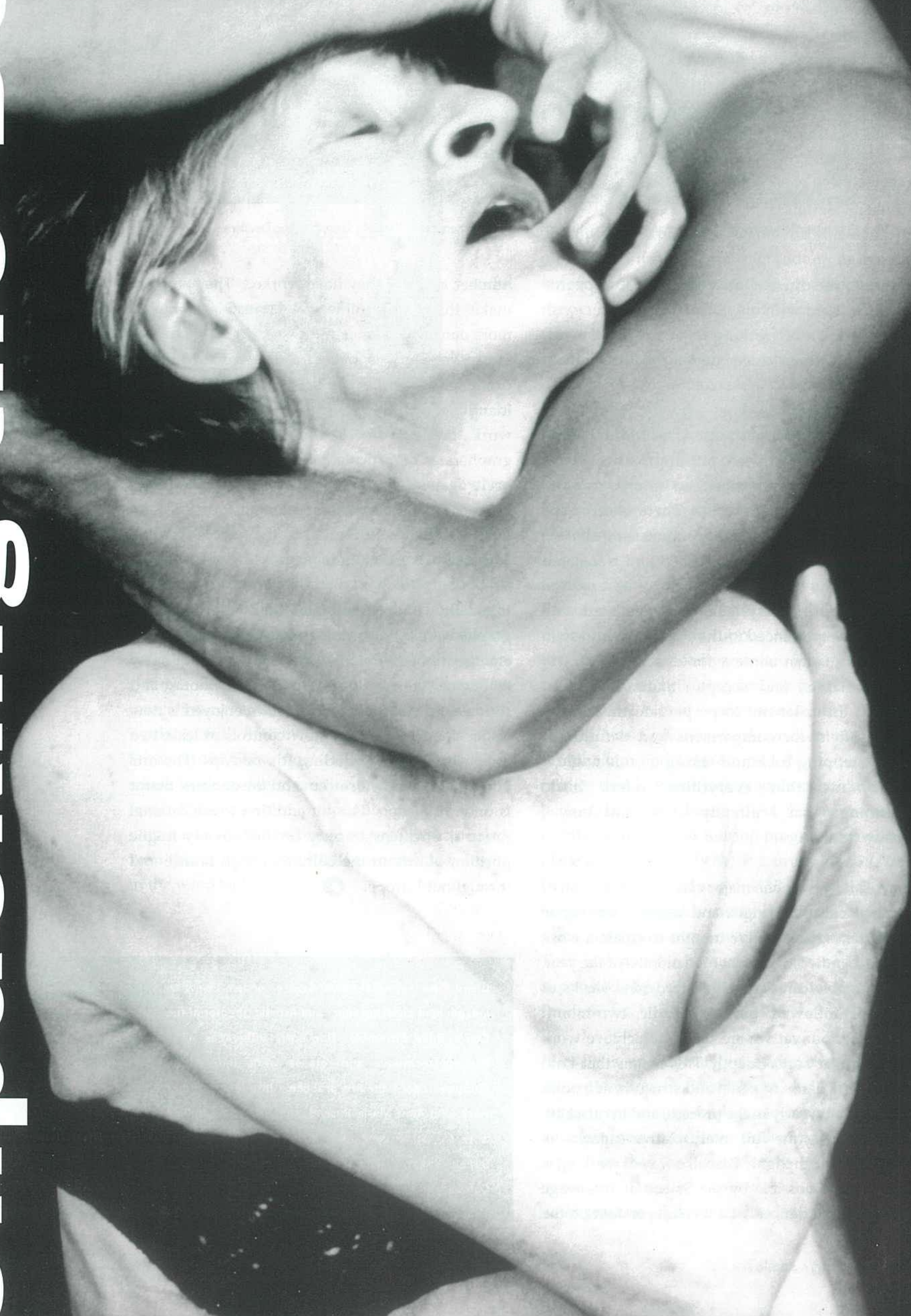

Diana Payne-Myers in **Bound to Please**, DV8. **Photo:** Thomas Gray

The girl-child and occasional boy-child who learns how to dance within the Western theatre dance model will inevitably come to know that, whilst anyone can dance, some bodies are more 'fit' to dance than others. Indeed the 'fit' of skin on bone will mark a body as material for the profession or not, for the identity of a dancer is configured corporeally.

Dancing bodies are anatomically and culturally inscribed with the codes of their profession. Like other cultural practices which rely upon the physical body as the primary mode of signification – for instance, athletics, striptease, body-sculpting and modelling – dancing bodies exist as a certain type.

This type is enforced by the gatekeepers of the industry as a prerequisite for entry and is maintained as a product of its material conditions. Dancing bodies both produce and are produced by their dancing.[1] The dancing body hovers as an ideal, seen and unseen, fantasised, glimpsed and desired. As a regulatory type, she is: *upright (straight), lean, compact, youthful, able-bodied, and feminine (male or female)*. These characteristic properties conflate with dominant ideals within Western culture about desirable bodily forms. The dancer fulfils the promise of a classical inheritance of idealism in the modelling of her matter into form, in the stylisation of the body into a unit of corporeal cohesion. Her body becomes her. Her corporeal identity shapes her sense of self in the world and the way she is perceived. She is read as 'dancer' by the way she walks, by the shape she is in, the postures she inhabits and by her preoccupation with bodily maintenance. She becomes a cultural stereotype.

Throughout dance histories, although there have been challenges to not just what counts as dance movement, but who can be counted as 'dancer', there is an ongoing investment within the industry on an exclusive model of the body. Categories of kind are named through exclusions. Containing the bodily identity of the dancer within particular limits is one way to mark her as a professional body. By these means dance is legitimised within the pantheon of high art forms.

The gatekeepers of professional dance training have an interest in enforcing the desirability and elitism of dancing bodies. The fact that only certain kinds of body are suited to the practice raises the stakes and makes the dancer a marketable commodity. As a form of commodity fetishism, dancing bodies are highly specialised and customised for particular markets. We participate in a 'theatre of commodities'. Dance critic, Judith Mackrell's review of Michael Clark's performance at the South Bank (part of As It Is, 9 July 1998) is indicative of the seduction of physical appearance over kinaesthetic sensation. 'These big swinging movements looked beautiful, largely because the dancers' long and lovely bodies made them so.'[2] The dancing body becomes an emblem of desire and property. But as Rebecca Schneider states, the body as instrument is riddled with 'commodity distress'.[3]

The scripting of desire upon the body, in particular female bodies, is based upon the need to create an appetite for consumption within commodity capitalism. The feminisation of the object within perspectival vision invites the viewer to engage in a form of sensuous contact. Women's bodies are used to create desire, they are intended to 'grab us, catch us, implicate us in the lure of their constructed vanishing points',[4] whether this be billboard advertising for cars or cosmetics, the side of a bus promotion for a West End musical, or the brochure for a festival of contemporary dance. The kinds of images that are selected to promote dance exist within a continuum of visual culture: promoters and publicists are well aware of the need to 'package' dance events with desirable images. Images taken out of context of their performance – in which there is scope for the performer to exceed the markings of her sex – may easily bleed into the customary display of desirable bodies within the commercial sector.[5]

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The ideal dancing body is dominantly inscribed within culture, however it is a body which constantly eludes appropriation. In entering the studio each day and trying to reproduce movement exactly and not succeeding, or in trying to execute a difficult movement and failing to do so, I glimpse at that which cannot be fully controlled, which exceeds the culturally imposed discursive limits of dance. I am forced to consider the effects of ageing, illness and injury, as well as the less definable alterations in body composition from one day to the next. Dancing is a confrontation with limits, we

experience our bodies as lacking. Yet the language we use to construct our dance identities creates a sense that our bodies are containable objects with clear boundaries. The schemata of the dancing body is hierarchically organised and divided: *left side and right side, top/bottom, front/back, inside/outside.* The dancer's body is a 'tool', 'instrument', 'medium', 'machine', 'vehicle' or 'raw material' and the choreographer is 'maker' or 'creator'. The idea of the body in dance as something that is manipulated, shaped, refined and controlled, reinforces a mind/body split through legitimising the power of the choreographer as master signifier. It is this bodily mastery which marks a professional dancing body from a non-professional body.

Living as we do under what Kathy Acker has described as the 'Sign of Descartes', that is within a dualistic culture, to be a dancer is to be all-body or no-body at all.[6] Not wanting to fall into the hegemonic labelling of a dancer as too much body, we invent new categories of kind: 'the thinking dancer', 'the knowing dancer', 'the intelligent dancer', or 'the reflective practitioner' (the term used in the publicity material for the recent dance conference, The Greenhouse Effect, September 1998). Or we reject the stereotypical associations altogether as Australian, Brian Smith entreats:

The status of dance as an art form is impoverished through a historical legacy of ambivalence and suspicion towards the Body

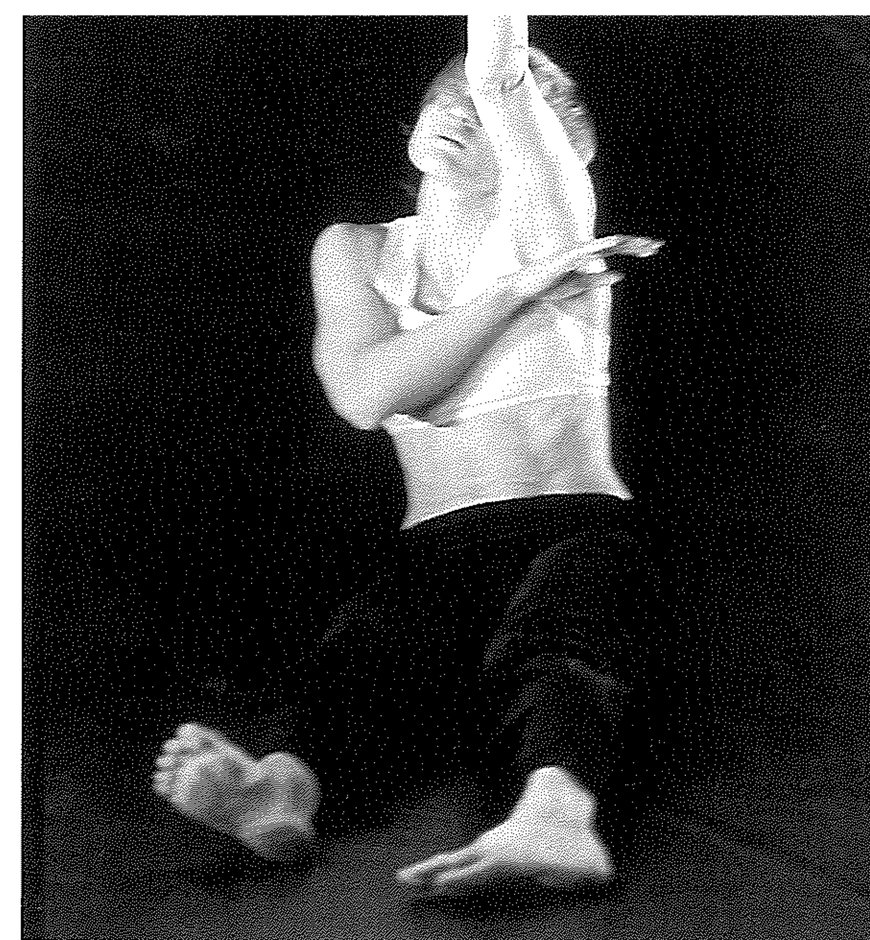
> *Don't call me a dancer, that two-dimensional, pointy footed thing. Don't call me a dancer, that mute, obedient, regimented thing. Don't say he's a dancer unless you say he's a dance-thinker, dance-writer, dance-artisan, dance-scientist. It's not a dancer's body, it's a gone for a run body. A walking down the street body, a making love body.*[7]

I recognise my own reluctance to embrace the stereotypical associations of the classification, 'dancer', in my emphasis on being a choreographer/dancer rather than a dancer/choreographer. Reductive definitions simplify the role of the dancer into the image of Dancer as Body. Dancers' bodies do not, however, carry the same value as other bodies, musicians and actors for instance, as reflected in the disparity in levels of funding, wages and resources, all of which contribute to making dance the poor relation within the performing arts. The status of dance as an art form is impoverished through a historical legacy of ambivalence and suspicion towards the Body.

Throughout the history of Western culture, the Body has been denigrated. Perceived as mutable, gross, material, liable to decay, it has been posited in opposition to the perceived purity of the mind. This denigration of the body as inferior and as a liability to higher morality has had an impact on dance in enforcing hierarchies of movement according to their capacity to edify and enlighten. Dances are 'named' through the exclusions of certain types of body and configurations of movement. By this I mean that a dancer's identity is literally figured, being largely located through the contours of her/his body and the shapes it makes. From the time of Plato, a distinction has been made between what are perceived to be undisciplined and uncontrolled, 'spontaneous' eruptions of physicality, and 'graceful', harmonious movements. Whereas the latter dances were described by Plato as of value because they reinforced civic values and were performed by citizens, the former, 'common' dances, were characterised as ugly and grotesque and were to be performed by slaves and prisoners as a deterrent, reminding good citizens how not to behave.[8] Curt Sachs, in his epic narrative, *The World History of Dance*, similarly distinguished between dance movements which are 'in harmony' with the body and those which, being dissonant and 'convulsive', are 'inharmonious'. Whereas the former ennobles 'the motions of more beautiful bodies', the latter 'parodies', through distortions, the movement of 'ugly bodies'.[9]

The primacy of Platonic ideals continues to infect dance culture through the privilege afforded certain kinds of movements and bodies over others. The ballet heritage, for instance, is valorised largely because it presumes to represent the 'highest' values of a classical inheritance. However, we live in an historical moment which is questioning the *ideophilia* of this classical inheritance, an interrogation which is largely focused upon the unpacking of the Body.[10] The Body is being prised open and interrogated. As the locus of identity it will not stay still. Within art practices the Body is no longer a fleshless abstraction but the material of the body itself becomes the subject. As Kroker and Cook claim, 'postmodernism emerges from the bleeding tissues of the body', from the need to re-think the bodily roots of subjectivity.[11]

Dancing bodies are beginning to leak, to betray the illusion of a chaste, hygienic and contained body. A paradigm shift is occurring away from the model of the classical body as mark and model of a 'fit' body for dance and its concomitant aesthetics of impotence, through the incorporation of the previously disenfranchised body. A theatre for the disenfranchised body is one which exceeds the logics of domination of dance discourses which dictate a 'proper' body for dance. Instances of these pariah bodies are to be found increasingly in what is characterised as mainstream dance through the incorporation of atypical bodies: in the wrinkled skin of septuagenarian Diana Payne-Myers in DV8's *Strange Fish* and *Bound to Please*; in the presence of children, tricksters and hustlers, in Alain Platel's Ballet C de la B's, *La Tristeza Complice, Bernadetje* and *Iets op Bach*; in the blood on the legs of Javier De Frutos and Jamie Watton in *Grass*.



Meg Stuart, ***XXX for Arlene and Colleagues.*** **Photo:** Chris Van der Burght

The staging of bodily identities with different stories to tell from the ones which have traditionally occupied the stage incorporates difference and opens the performing frame to multiple spectator positions. In taking up a place within the mainstream, these Others offer the opportunity to rupture the aesthetics of good taste, the 'touristic gaze' conditioned upon the repetitive performance and display of sameness.[12] In this return of the repressed and the denied body, the body which is refused visibility in mainstream dance practices, cultural stereotypes about dancing bodies are made evident, startling the complacency of the dominant gaze and challenging the viewers to see these Others as bodies also available for visual consumption and signification.

Further ways in which the customary limits of the dancing body are challenged is through choreographies which embody narratives of corporeal displacement and disintegration, and in works which do not encourage the safe fantasising of the voyeur in the display of the body as an emblem of desire (commodity fetishism) and which rely upon kinaesthetic perception rather than visual imagery to represent differences. In her solo, *XXX for Arlene and Colleagues* (As It Is, The South Bank, 9 July 1998), Meg Stuart represents the experience of a divided self. She appears as a solitary figure on a bare stage in a state of disarray. She is partly undressed, her spine arches and reaches as if attempting to leave the ground, her hand tugs at the base of her neck, her body ready but unable to move from the spot. She migrates to another place and begins to dance with one half of her body, girl-style, to a song by Serge Gainsbourg, the other half of her body is immobilised, frozen as if in paralysis. Meg, in an interview with Jonathan Burrows, writes of this conflict between the controlled and the uncontrolled body, of the confrontation between 'the image or phantasy one has about the movement and the action'.[13] The fractured physicality of Stuart's choreography denies the fixity of an image or the internal coherence of a stable form. Embedded in the axes of the world, her body becomes a body subject to pain, disorder, rupture and the unexpected. Her body as a site of struggle is not singular but made multiple; seemingly tugged into different modalities of motion, it resists closure and is incapable of transcendence. The ground of identity is the body and not a flight from it.

Despite these examples of resistant practices within dance, the historical legacy of the Classical Body continues to underpin relationships between body and mind. This is often most evident in dance training with its insistence on a chaste, hygienic and contained body, operating within strict limits. In undertaking the process of training, the body of the dancer enters the violent circuitry of sameness.