

Review Essay

The Six Questions; Acting Technique for Dance Performance. Daniel Nagrin, 1997. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press. xi + 221 pages, including four appendices: 195-217. Index: 218-221. Price: \$19.95 (paperback). ISBN: 0-8229-5624-1

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For those whose interest in the dance travels mainly along anthropological paths, *The Six Questions* may not immediately seem a thought-provoking selection. What does acting technique have to do with the anthropological study of human movement?

If you are interested in the ways dancers infuse meaning into movement, this book is invaluable, for Daniel Nagrin writes of the struggles, conflicts and contradictions of a professional dancer's artistic efforts. He tells what it is like in the "trenches" of dance performance. He portrays this process as complex, tricky, and full of uncertainty, but it is an honest picture of the realities of meaning-making with movement. It is just one of the many reasons to read this book.

In dance literature, Nagrin's book is a milestone. *The Six Questions* is, to my knowledge, the first book to write about acting techniques in the dancer's language -- the medium of movement, although there is a book, published in 1965, entitled, *Stanislavski and the Ballet*, by Natalia Roslavleva, that Nagrin drew to my attention. While acting theories are applicable to movement, the practical implications of acting using the medium of movement is best inspired through the use of images. Verbal acting techniques are not known for taking the process of acting consistently to this end, although actors constantly deal with images. Perhaps it is good that we have waited for a dancer of Daniel Nagrin's stature to write a book on acting.

The author's longevity and vast experience in the field of human movement includes fifty-plus years of career as a dancer, choreographer, director, and professor. He danced on Broadway with the legendary (but unheralded) modern dance pioneer, Helen Tamiris. He transformed his choreographic works into solo concerts for which he is best known. From 1970, he directed an improvisational dance group, called 'Workgroup' in New York. Together with his studies of traditional acting with Sanford Meisner, Stella Adler and Joseph Chaikin's Group Theatre, his improvisational group provided the right mix of movement and verbal theatrical skills to translate the ideas of acting with voice into acting solely with movement.

But Nagrin brings more than longevity and experience to his authorship. To me, he demonstrates his authority on the subject of acting for dancers because of his overall attitude: "In many of the pages, I speak from personal experience. I do not do this out of vanity or to claim that I have the answers. I do this precisely because I do not have the answers" (p. xvi). In other words, he encourages dancers to find their own answers, as he did. Nagrin's attitude is practical and accepting of the complexities in the professional dance world.

He presents his views more as a path, not a goal. He is passionate about dancing and this may seem one-sided, but his viewpoint hits the nail on the head.

Professional dancers must have an intense desire to dance because the intensity generates energy that is essential to create and live in the professional dance world—a world that is too competitive and too demanding for artists of indifference to linger. Paradoxically, Nagrin's purpose serves both the passionate and those who are somewhat less committed to their art.

He initially asks the question, "How many dancers believe that work on the internal life of a dance performance is every bit as demanding as work on the physical [aspects of performance]?" (p. xiii). This is a recurring troublespot in the current dance scene, with which I concur: most dancers work for physical/technical goals, and while these are obvious necessities, they shouldn't comprise the entire program of professional dancers. Physical performance skills are some of the elements that form the relationship between dancer, audience and choreographer, but they are not the only ones.

Nagrin's thesis on acting is that the dancer must transcend self and become the "other." His six questions (developed from Stanislavski's method of acting) give dancers a place to start. All six questions can be compressed into one sentence: "who (or what) is doing what to whom (or what) and where, in what context and under what difficulties and why?" (p. 34). Nagrin does not present the question or its answer as a magical formula, the answers to which automatically yield good acting, and neither is the question to be used as a blueprint for an inner scenario. The question is designed to yield an image to be chiseled and refined by each specific dancer. The image can be used to infuse the dancer's movements with depth and intention—it inspires the dance.

Nagrin's writing also illuminates implicitly understood modes of operation behind the triangle of relationships of dancer, choreographer and audience, giving behind-the-scenes insights into common occurrences in the professional dance world. For example, dancers must sometimes subtly modify the directions they are given by a choreographer in order to perform the meanings of the movements the choreographer is trying to achieve which means that Nagrin encourages dancers to take responsibility for creating meanings in a role. He is convinced that responsibility for meaning goes further than the dancer. That is, the choreographer creates the movement and spatial relationships, and the dancers interpret the movement, but the audience must also play a part. They inevitably create meanings for a dance.

According to Nagrin, the difference between Brecht and Stanislavski is that Brecht rejected the "theatre of illusion because he felt that it permitted an audience to experience compassion and tears in the theatre; afterward, they could return to their self-centered indifference. He [Brecht] wanted a performing style he called 'the A-effect.' 'A' standing for alienation as opposed to the empathy aroused in the theatre of Stanislavski" (p. 81). For Nagrin this is the difference between dances as art forms (the Brechtian approach) and

dances as entertainment (the Stanislavskian approach). For a clearer picture of what is meant, see p. 118 of the interview with Nagrin in this issue.

There is a strong theme woven throughout *The Six Questions* about two types of human awareness: thinking and feeling, which is interesting because the idea that dancers are motivated and operate equally through intellect and emotion is historically absent in much of dance literature. The scales are often tipped toward emotions that overpower intellect, leaving the impression that dancers are *mindless* movers. Nagrin's book goes some way toward redressing this imbalance. First, he identifies the relationship of mind and emotion, naming it the "heart/mind" of the dancer. Second, dancers are continually advised to read, broadening their knowledge with other ideas so that the critical thinking that Nagrin so strongly advocates can proceed.

Nagrin's thesis begins with the premise that the internal life of a dancer's performance is as important as the physical movements of the dance—a fact that many dancers, instructors, choreographers and professionals neglect. He advocates working toward an image of "otherness" that the dancer becomes onstage, that is refined by each dancer for himself or herself. We are to understand that a "specific image" is good, but a personal style isn't: "If a dancer cultivates a particular style, there is a whole world of otherness that is closed off to that artist" (p. 21). Becoming the other is of paramount importance to this author and throughout the book there are many references to this. *The Six Questions* provides a place to start, but not to finish. That is, to create immediacy and retain freshness in each role, Nagrin suggests focusing in the present and using centering techniques to help bring a character to life.

The lessons for dancers in this book come not only from words on each page, but from the book's structure. Divided into two main sections (theory and workbook), Nagrin achieves a balance between the twofold division (the "heart/mind") of the dancer. There is also a balance between theory and practical experience, for Nagrin combines theoretical constructs and ideas with exercises in the workbook section so that dancers can experience theory in practice. In his introduction, he advises, "read it, study it, think on it, practice it, bend it, twist it or reject it" (p. xviii). The author's presentation of freedom of choice informed by critical thinking furnishes a sense of liberation. He encourages dancers to take responsibility for the creation of meaning in the performance of dances.

Finally there are four appendices in the book that deserve mention because of their connection with Nagrin's sense of the paradoxical nature of humanity and the task of reproducing that humanity in the form of acting for dancers. The first Appendix expands the theme of creating meaning and the relationship between director, dancer and choreographer. The second advances Nagrin's rule that one *never* reveals the inner world the dancer creates for his or her work, because he believes that the reality of the performance is created by the audience through viewing and experiencing the performer(s). To explain what is happening inside a performer's self destroys the creation of the audience's experience and violates their integrity because, singly and together, an audience creates their own interpretations. In spite of

this injunction, he does analyze one of his own works (A Dance in the Sun) as illustration (p. 201ff). The third Appendix, containing a criticism of Susanne Langer, is too complex to deal with here, but a brief discussion of the fourth Appendix, consisting of a reprint of Federico Garcia Lorca's essay, *The Duende*, is important.

Nagrin is convinced that Lorca's essay should be read by every dancer at least once a year: "I believe its total impact represents the ultimate challenge to anyone who dares to take that step out upon the stage. Any artist in any field can make a connection with the concept of *duende*. It is a statement without parallel" (p. 105).

Duende means going inward, letting the movement absorb the dancer until he or she is in a near-trance-like state. As I interpret *duende*, it consists of those times when everything works for the dancer and the audience. During these times, dancers do not lose control of their selves, nor do they lose control of their minds to their emotions. On the contrary, every aspect of the dancer's being is working in harmony by achieving an interactive balance between emotional involvement and conscious control. It is a glorious feeling.

The common perception is that dancers abandon themselves to passion. For those who have experienced *duende* this is not an honest picture of reality. Passion is a driving force for the artist to continue dancing because it is such a difficult road. Passion provides the fuel for the intense energy required to dance and create, but passion is not the sole motivator of those who choose professional dancing as a career. Danced movements have artistic expression as a means of communication, but this does not mean that there is no thought or intellectual expertise accompanying emotion and its creation. Dancers are intelligent. Daniel Nagrin is an extremely intelligent dancer. What else can I say? Read the book!