

THINKING AND MOVEMENT. A CRITICAL REVIEW  
OF SHEETS-JOHNSTONE'S ARTICLE, 'THINKING IN MOVEMENT'

Dancing is essentially the active termination of a  
symbolic transformation of experience.

D. Williams (1971).

It is not often that a dancer/choreographer presumes to question a professional philosopher regarding philosophical matters. However, Maxine Sheets-Johnstone's article 'Thinking in Movement' often plunges her, the philosopher, into areas usually thought to be exclusive to the dance professional. There are several points at which I think the arguments in this article tend to discredit her premise for an "implicit bodily logos".

She seems to insist that dance improvisation is not a symbolic system. How, for instance, can human actions be meaningful if they are not rule-related to a given human community? Although the author has made efforts to describe and analyze the body and the mind in dialogue within the dance form of movement improvisation, she has overlooked the necessary definitions behind any form of dance. Using her skills as a movement theorist as well as her personal experience as a dance improviser, Sheets-Johnstone picks her way carefully through the labyrinth of various theories concerning thought and action. Although she has relied upon such sources as Wittgenstein, Piaget and Merleau-Ponty, she has bypassed equally necessary guides such as Langer, Best, Williams and Hampshire.

In this review I will deal with two themes presented by the author and draw upon other voices from fields significant to the arguments in question and finally, suggest alternative arguments for presentation on the "slippery subject" of thinking in movement (See Best, chapter two).

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Sheets-Johnstone presents the notion of dance improvisation as different from other forms of dance. One comes to this conclusion because the author repeatedly draws attention to the idea that in a dance improvisation the dancer is required to have a particular type of involvement and intention towards his or her actions. One is lead to assume from this that Sheets-Johnstone views dance improvisation as categorically unique, because as she insists, it is not a system of actions, but rather a process of creativity in action. She points out that "in a dance improvisation, the process of creating is not the means of realizing a dance, it is the dance itself" (1981:339).<sup>1</sup> However, because the author denies dance improvisation any definition as a human action sign system, denying therefore that dance improvisation has rule structure, intentionality, grammaticality, and the like, she is in my view necessarily misled in her arguments at the outset (See Puri and Hart, 1982). She insists that

a dance improvisation "creates an ongoing present" and does not in this way get caught creating "an artistic product" (1981:399). I submit that this way of thinking is insupportable in light of other aspects of the issue not addressed by the author in her article.

Sheets-Johnstone has chosen to base her arguments upon "a descriptive account of dance improvisations" (1981:401), but in so doing she has neglected to take an objective stand with reference to the implicit conditions of her activity. One is left asking, for example, whether or not there is an audience involved; what, if any, are the impressions to be received by those watching an improvisation; what are the extenuating circumstances surrounding the instances of this experience either for the dancer or the observer. In other words, what is the relationship between the performers and the observers?

Is the improvised dance a construct of the human mind to her way of thinking? Is it exclusive to the human being and if so, are all cultures potential improvisors? It is interesting to note that certain South Indian dance forms utilize what we would consider to be improvisatory techniques in that the same sequence of movement is rarely, if ever, repeated twice from one performance to the next. What is to a South Indian's way of thinking an absolute and recognized dance form with codes, traditions and rules, is often to an unsuspecting Westerner some sort of spontaneous form of expression. What defines a construct of the human mind and by whom? I contend that Sheets-Johnstone has attempted to define dance improvisation from a very small lily pad in a very large pond. Simply by giving dance improvisation a name and identity, one would assume she must recognize it as a structure of human concepts, and therefore has symbolic features. We are not discussing the actions and intentions behind the activity of eating spaghetti. Although all human actions can be defined as body language, we are speaking about a dance form; a highly complex set of body actions, usually specific to a particular group of people.

Sheets-Johnstone is perfectly correct when she insists that not all movement is guided by a process of thought such as a more formally choreographed dance might be. Nor is it necessarily true that a dancer must always be actively engaged to a purposeful end during the course of a dance event. However, as Hampshire puts it, "... it is a necessary truth -- and one of the most important truisms about human beings -- that if a [dancer] has been fully conscious for some time, there must be some verbs of action that truthfully summarise what he has been doing during that time ... The mode of performance may vary through many degrees; but if conscious, then necessarily performing; and if unconscious, necessarily not performing, in the sense that no action is attributable to an unconscious man as its agent ... A conscious mind is always envisaging possibilities of action, of finding means towards ends, as a body is always occupying a certain position. To be a conscious human being, and therefore a thinking being, is to have intentions or plans, to be trying to bring about a certain effect." (1959:93-94; 119)

If dance improvisation is, as she says, "akin to a jazz jam session" of a group of musicians (1981:399), it still does not shed light on the other components involved in the discussion of a dance form. Is this movement improvisation taking place entirely for the enjoyment of the participant(s) involved? What kind of event is it and how does

she define it in these terms? Answers to these questions contain crucial information that one expects to know if one is to participate in a dialogue with the author through her article. I, too, believe in the importance of personal experience in the analysis of a dance form and am in support of her concern for the performer, but not at the expense of the constituent elements of a performance. It is difficult to discuss the subject matter at hand without some shared theoretical categories. Such relevant aspects of the event as the exegetical, the operational and the positional components involved (Fortes and Dieterlan, 1965:79-90)<sup>2</sup> have been omitted by the author. Thus, I will continue by proposing alternative arguments to Sheets-Johnstone's view.

### Constituent Elements of the Event

Sheets-Johnstone explains that the 'dancers' have agreed upon certain rules connected with the practice of dance improvisation, so we must assume she means dancers as opposed to non-dancers or 'anyone who can move'. That is to say, those persons she speaks of not only have a mutual understanding as to the 'givens' of an improvisation, but that they are also specifically persons who have had at least some trained involvement with their bodies, enough at least to qualify them as 'dancers'. If this is the case, then I conclude that dance improvisation has many more rules and definitions inherent to the form than the author has chosen to address. Along those lines I must ask whether, like a jamming jazz musician, one can improve one's skill at improvising in movement?

Finally, the improvisors may not intend for a session of improvisation to be performed again, but it in fact could be re-created and preserved by means of video, film and most particularly, Labanotation and the like. I understand this to be a vital aspect of the author's argument; that dance improvisation is wholly an "interfusion of sense and motion" (1981:402). A dance improvisation has a beginning and an end which is recognized by the performers and although their perceptions and intentions may be focused upon the fleeting, 'spontaneous' nature of the form, it is nonetheless a distinct, definable, rule-governed and specialized type of dancing that is potentially an artistic product inasmuch as the event can be judged and evaluated aesthetically as an entity, thereby typifying it as a construct of the human mind, i.e. a symbolic form. Furthermore, to argue that an event has no ontological status or permanent character in human social life is an indefensible position. "If human movements can be notated and repeated, we need not trouble ourselves with their existential status" (Williams, 1980:20). To put it another way, what dance does not have an ongoing present?

Another problem arises when the author describes the creative process of the improvisors as being "spontaneous". She insists that "what is essential (to the form) is a non-separation of thinking and doing" (1981:400) and that "the dance is created in one non-stop choreographic swoop" (1981:402). The author goes on to reject the idea that thinking is tied necessarily to language and to rationality, and says that these are misleading assumptions that hinder our comprehension of the process of thinking in movement. Furthermore, she says, this misconception leads us to believe that thinking is, as such, limited to "a symbolic

system; that thinking is transactable only in terms of a hard currency like language, and that it proceeds in a linear; i.e. rational fashion," and is dependent upon "specific rules demanded by the symbolic counters or currency utilized" (1981:400-1). Sheets-Johnstone has fallen into a trap here, often a fault in empiricist philosophies. That is to say, human experience is not mere data of consciousness "passing like a film before the impassive observer" (Hampshire, 1959:71). There is nothing unnatural about applying "verbs as names of processes initiated and enjoyed ... Because I always have intentions, and because knowing what I have just done and knowing what I am immediately about to do, my attention does not rest in the present" (Hampshire, 1959:72). Whether a dance finds form in a millisecond or over years, the essential criteria behind the human intervention still apply. I do not believe Sheets-Johnstone is implying that improvisation happens by magic.

### Human Intervention and the Symbolic Nature of Dance

First, I understand that the creative process in making a pre-choreographed dance is somewhat different from that which takes place when an improvisational dance 'comes into being', but the agent behind the movement is no less human and no less engaged in an experience of past and future if he or she happens to be creating 'on the spot'. Consequently, there is an undeniable linear element involved within the process. Similarly, as will be discussed later, the dimensions of space experienced by the agent of movement are necessarily perceived by language speaking humans in a structured manner. Second, as Langer says, "the material furnished by the senses is constantly wrought into symbols, which are our elementary ideas. Some of these ideas can be combined and manipulated in the manner we call 'reasoning' ... Symbolization is pre-rational, but not pre-rational" (Langer, 1942:42). Charles Varela points out, "It is our distinction as human beings that thinking is simultaneously rational and linguistic" (Varela, 1983:144). Third, it is true that only some of our expressions through movement are signs insofar as they indicate specific meanings within a culture and refer to other things (and the author does not rule out the use of this type of movement in improvisation), but it is not true that human movement is non-symbolic and thus not language related. Although the dance movement in improvisation may not be symbolic of something specific, as choreographed dance might be, the actions of the human body within a definable dance form are most certainly symbolic, if nothing other than a conscious will to move (Langer, 1953:175).

It is true that dance of any kind has a profound involvement with feelings and bodily symptoms and sensations. Sheets-Johnstone recognizes this fundamental fact. Where I see her fail in her argument, however, is at the point at which she denies the human being his fundamental involvement with symbolic systems. If she insists that dance improvisation is devoid of this primary ingredient, it is difficult to understand how she perceives this form of dance to be in any way meaningful to dancer or audience. Rules themselves express and communicate symbolically within a society or public. Because dance improvisation is explicitly a dramaturgical, publicly oriented event, it must be the case that there are socially shared, rule-governed principles behind this dance

form, as she herself has suggested. I do not believe that she meant to imply that dance improvisation is something which is either therapeutic, primordial, infantile, or enacted within a state of sleep or trance.<sup>3</sup>

### The Idea of Human Action Signs and the Semasiological Body

In order to investigate the reasons for the symbolic nature of improvisational dance, it is necessary to introduce some supportive ideas. Two important principles of human action signs need to be addressed here, one concerning the time/space continuum of body languages, and the other directly dealing with the human 'semasiological body'.<sup>4</sup> Sheets-Johnstone implies that dance improvisation is ephemeral in nature but insists that improvised movements are not mere 'cavortings'. She infers, instead, that they are informative in nature as implied by her statement "I am exploring the world in movement ... as one might wonder about the world in words, I am wondering about the world directly, in movement ... I am actively exploring its possibilities ..." (1981:403). This explorer within a dance improvisation has, presumably, acquired a "fixed interpretive framework" of substantial complexity prior to the experience itself (Polanyi, 1958:58). In referring back to an earlier point concerning the rules and requirements for a 'dancer' in this dance form, it might be added that, like jazz musicians, it is necessary that they be at least minimally capable of conceptual thought and in a reasonable control of his or her behavior mechanisms and social responses. This dance form then, still dramaturgical in form, is also educationally functional, at least for the performer. As such there must be certain conditions surrounding the optimal facilitation of this function. Furthermore, any achievement or reward felt by the improviser is contingent upon a prior comprehension of that reality. "The whole process of discovery and confirmation ultimately relies on our own accrediting of our own vision of reality" (Polanyi, 1958:130).

What is Sheets-Johnstone perceiving as a dance improvisation if it does not have foundation in her own symbolically organized conceptual apparatus?<sup>5</sup> What I am suggesting is that the time/space continuum in which she perceives herself to be moving, and in which she is perceptually making choices as to where to move, etc., functions symbolically. Here is where Fortes' and Dieterlen's levels of meanings become useful as paradigmatic models (1965:80). If the experience is to be meaningful, i.e. educational for the improviser, then necessarily there must include some form of 'position meaning', that is to say, its relationship to other meanings.<sup>6</sup> Her thinking does not have to be divorced from her doing, nor does her doing have to be rational, per se, as she insists it is not. Her faculties of perception and thought are very likely in 'spontaneous' discourse with one another in this form of dance, as she claims, but the entirety is embedded in a symbolic framework having nearly everything to do with her language base. There are deeper structures and classification systems beneath her behavior in an improvisation which are necessarily language-based.

All dance and human movement takes place within three dimensions of space (up/down, front/back, right/left) and one of time. Furthermore, the human body is a ninety-dimensional mobile object in space/time and the possibilities of all combined movements of the human body is finitely limited. By introducing the fundamental 'structure of interacting dualisms' (Williams, 1976:158), we have a generative structure from which we can proceed to

investigate the value system and linguistic foundations of any given human action sign system, of which improvisational dance is one. The theory of the semasiological body or expressive body, as Williams presents it, demonstrates "the futility of any approach to human movement that attempts to separate the empirical from the conceptual with reference to human actions ... " (1981:211).

There may or may not be an overt 'grammatically' organized system within a dance improvisation (although some dance improvisation posits this), but nonetheless the medium of human movement itself is profoundly rule-based even before other dimensions of organizations are introduced. Such polarities and oppositions as u/d, f/b, r/l are basic to human expression and as such are linguistically based. In Western societies, for instance, it has been noted that movement has been described as being cuboidal in structure but that such "programmatical concepts of space" may not be translatable 'carte-blanche' in certain other societies, notably that of the Navajo Indian (Farnell-Durr, 1981:237). For that matter, simply the way in which an improvising dancer perceives herself to be here and not there is a semasiological issue (as was stated earlier in reference to the spatial orientation of the human agent of human actions).

In conclusion, I would say that it is not Sheets-Johnstone's argument for an on-going creative process integral to the act of improvisation to which I object. Certainly subjective intuition is a fundamental and quite necessary component in body action. I am supportive of experiential movement formats of this sort. What I do object to is her insistence that in improvisational dance the dancer is an "existentially declarative body (that) does not mediate its way through the world but lives it directly," as it "creates moment by moment" (1981:406). This may be her experiential perception of the situation, but I suggest that that is not the end of the matter. The 'bodily logos' she speaks of is not capable of meaning and conceptions and abstractions when it has no symbol-making properties as she has argued throughout her theses. Sheets-Johnstone perceives the body and the mind as functioning as a whole, but what she does not recognize is that this human totality qua dancer also exists within a larger structured and symbolic social totality. She speaks of "a body which moment by moment fulfills a kinetic destiny and so invests the world with meaning" (1981:406). What ultimately this intuitive faculty is founded upon, however, is linguistically based, symbolic forms of criterion. David Best tells us that "... the fundamental confusion of any subjective theory is that it inevitably has implicitly to rely on precisely the objectivity of meaning which it is explicitly trying to deny. It tries to saw off the branch on which it is sitting" (1981:330). Wittgenstein describes it as 'froomwappa'.

I have attempted to illuminate the various pitfalls which I feel Sheets-Johnstone has been subject to and to introduce some ideas to help clarify the matter. Dance improvisation is not so unique a form of dance that it warrants attention irrespective of its constituent elements.

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## NOTES

1. The dance implies to my mind all dances at any time throughout the world and I suggest the concept of a dance is more to the point in this context. What does the author mean by "The Dance itself ..."? What is her theory behind this notion?
2. Fortes and Dieterlen (1965:79-90) present three levels of meaning when referring to a symbol. These include (a) the level of indigenous interpretation or exegetical meaning (the folk model's interpretation), (b) the operational meaning (the social dynamics involved and the use of the meaning), and (c) the positional meaning (the contextual framework or gestalt of the meaningful activity). For further discussion, see Williams (1980:21).
3. Unless the author implies, which I doubt, that dance improvisation consists of yawns, scratches, writhings in agony and fleeings in fear, etc. (all potentially non-symbolic human action), I insist that the process of improvisation is symbolic in kind and therefore meaningful. "There are few things that men do or want to do, possess or want to possess, that have not, in addition to their mechanical or biological value, a symbolic value" (Hayakawa, 1964: 214-216).
4. The semasiological body "consists of the human body defined in terms of its points of articulation, each of which has a finite number of degrees of freedom of action. The semasiological body is the human body defined and specified as an expressive instrument for meaningful action" (Williams, 1975:xv).
5. "The very word 'performance' is the reverse of 'instinctive'. Even when we speak of human 'instinctive' or 'impulsive' actions, we refer to symbolic acts which partake of the conceptual strata in spoken and body languages ..." (Williams, 1975:ix).
6. See Fortes and Dieterlen (1965:79-90) for a more thorough discussion of exegetical, operational and positional meaning.
7. "The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group ... we see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predisposes certain choices of interpretation." E. Sapir (Whorf, 1956:134).

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\*\*NB: Due to an oversight, too close to publication, the references for 'Williams, D.' (above) are out of chronological order.

The Editors.