

AERIAL DANCE AND ITS EMERGENCE FROM SITE-SPECIFIC CHOREOGRAPHY IN AMERICAN DANCE CULTURE

With the emergence of site-specific work from choreographers such as Trisha Brown, Joanna Haigood and Noemie Lafrance, aerial dance has become more prevalent. However, aerial dance itself emerged independently from site-specific work and is thoroughly utilized by choreographers, dancers, and producers in the acrobatic, avant-garde and competitive fields of dance. Aerial dance provided another dimension for choreographers to redefine gravity in their work, movement and dancers. It also provided new environments and situations for dance, which broadened audiences, context and inspiration in such works. By removing dance from the concert stage, the dance itself became temporarily un-definable which allowed for a redefining of possibility, movement and vocabulary. Separating aerial dance from site-specific work is a bit of a “which came first” situation, as some artists were forced to utilize aerial concepts to navigate a specific site, while others gravitated towards a site deliberately to produce an aerial work. Through the work of companies and artists such as Joanna Haigood, Project Bandaloop and Cirque du Soleil, aerial dance currently exists as a fusion of dance, rock climbing, gymnastics and theatricality easily molded to the choreographer’s movement needs or desires.

In the modern dance revolution of the 1960’s and 1970’s, choreographers became highly resourceful in the creation of their works as many operated without any kind of budget, staff, or production values. New York City became a playground of inspiration and a stage for the ambitious choreographer. Buildings, streets, storefronts and lofts – they all became potential environments for dance. Everything was up for negotiation and

interpretation. Possibilities abounded as movement exploded to include the everyday pedestrian, silence, stillness and continual improvisation. With choreographers and dancers finding themselves “homeless” from the concert stage or auditorium, they found new homes for their work and movement in historic places such as Judson Memorial Church. Work could be created out of anything, for any reason – or no reason at all. Freedom and liberation resounded clearly from the political protests to dance choreography.

Going Airborne: Suspension & Design

Modern dance stretched the boundaries of movement and the body performing it, often embracing gravity, weight and a sense of grounding. This was in direct opposition to the strict dictation of weightlessness and verticality sought in classical ballet. Working with the floor instead of working against or in spite of it became the new mindset for dancers and choreographers. With the first site-specific works including an aerial element, choreographers simply relocated the floor. The body moving across the “floor” also reassigned its sense of balance. Walking down the side of a wall or building consisted of vertical movement executed horizontally, with an altered resistance point (Cunningham 2006, 125).

Ceilings no longer existed within many of these new sites, continuing the theme of liberation and freedom. The ceiling now consisted of open sky. The walls became whatever immediately surrounded the performers’ bodies. Sometimes the floor was the only wall. Sometimes the floor was facing the dancer as they stood horizontally on the only wall (the wall being the side of a building, the floor being the actual ground). Dancers had to understand their center of balance from a new dimension. By

incorporating a new point of view regarding the environment of dance, the dancing body also changed. Legs acted as a second set of arms now that they were no longer the sole means for upright support. Hands grasped and explored the air, bricks and trees. The body moved outside of predetermined positions and limitations. The performer experienced a different form of weight. Dancers encountered suspension and resistance from different angles.

Aerial Choreographers: Site-Specific Environments and Navigation

Trisha Brown

For the early members of Judson Dance Theater, site-specific work allowed choreographers to incorporate actual architecture into their point of view. Providing a strong visual background, choreographers could share their point of view within a real environment with real challenges. Anything could change at any time. Such interruptions provided performers opportunities for improvisation and interaction with the environment which stretched their abilities tremendously. Envisioning work in such an uncontrolled environment required creativity, efficiency and, at times, blind faith. Instead of cautiously stepping out on a limb, choreographers were throwing themselves off a cliff in their search for new movement.

Trisha Brown led the way in embracing new sites for dance. By departing from her classical training at Mills College as a dance major and further experience with Robert Dunn at Merce Cunningham's studio, Brown helped forge a new wave of movement in the avant-garde. Devout simplicity showed complexity in minuscule actions that challenged the viewer mentally by not inundating the audiences' senses with sets, costumes and traditional stage theatricality (Livet 1978, 42). Brown and her

contemporaries also focused on a continual dialogue with each other and their audience. Brown began testing the depth of sites for dance beginning with two 1970 pieces: *Walking on the Wall* and *Man Walking Down the Side of a Building*. As aerial site-specific works, both pieces employed pedestrian movement as navigation of the environment was of primary emphasis. Much like guerilla marketing techniques today, choreographers often had to act swiftly to achieve their choreographic aspirations before law-enforcement or landlords became concerned and, subsequently, involved. These early aerial works were filled with tension, excitement and shock value for the performers and viewers. Later in 1973, Brown expanded her repertoire of sites to include *Roof Piece*, with dancers performing sequential phrases of movement on multiple rooftops for an audience watching via another rooftop. These first aerial works (and present aerial pieces) included an athletic element of rappelling or rock climbing. Dancers often worked in harnesses (as they did in *Walking on the Wall*), belaying up and down the site. Attachment to a rope and/or harness simultaneously limited and expanded the performers' range of movement. The performer no longer had full control over their movement nor were they held back by the restriction of gravity. For Brown's early aerial works the technical quality was also of an improvisatory aspect, as she wove together cut up clothing to create the webbing for *Walking on the Wall* (Perron 2002, 53). Today, technical theatre is its own genre with academic programs devoted to production elements.

Noemie Lafrance

Lafrance extracts the maximum potential from her sites for creative and choreographic appeal, as well as civic engagement. In various projects, including work

which instigated the restoration of an abandoned pool, Lafrance has had to defend her work from defiant public officials and business owners. With her site work, Lafrance exhibits a passionate discourse on current affairs and social environments. As she situates her company within the realm of experimental (perhaps to free her from the restrictions of labels or categories such as genre, choreographic methods and technique), Lafrance also emphasizes engaging the public through the environment and choreographic display which she attempts by placing her work on community sites that resonate politically and socially (or become politically and socially charged through her work) for those within that community (Sens Production 2009).

Lafrance's work *Melt* displayed a new dynamic of aerial work. Her dancers were seated but attached to a wall with heat lamps melting layers of wax on their bodies. Perched high above the ground, her dancers did not move through the air like one might initially imagine in an aerial performance. Lafrance did not seek to conceal the potential discomfort or fears her dancers may have experienced performing in such an environment. Lafrance's work, while highly polished and exciting, does not present itself as thrill-seeking or gravity-defying either. Her works maintain a serious, almost somber tone. Lafrance uses each work in each site to extrapolate her ideas about current events and her position in society as a citizen, woman, mother and artist.

Joanna Haigood

Haigood's rich array of experiences and personal history perhaps influence her ability to elucidate memory and context from the sites chosen for her choreography. Haigood's diverse cultural background coupled with her father's military career led her around the world before a brief settling in New York where she initially studied at Bard

College. Her travels took her to a London conservatory where she interacted with a Barnum and Bailey trapeze artist. These experiences helped Haigood craft her choreographic and movement point of view (Murphy 1994, 19). Eventually Haigood formed Zaccho Dance Theater based in San Francisco. Haigood built her choreographic repertoire by straddling heavy concepts within specific sites and implementing levels of aerial work as she developed the skill to do so. Haigood always had a preference for climbing and investigating, but not until her aerial education began was she fully able to realize her vision for her own dances.

From abandoned World War II factories to trolley cars and clock towers, Haigood approaches each choreographic work with historical reverence. Haigood's work does not exist for the sole purpose of exploring aerial stunts nor does she consider herself a purely site-specific choreographer (Murphy 1994, 19). Haigood simply uses what she knows and what she feels best interprets the situation or site – which often involves aerial work with ropes, harnesses, silks or hoops. Unlike choreographer Elizabeth Streb, Haigood does not emphasize the fear of falling or impact but the ability to craft new movement consistently in a safe aerial environment. She does not deliberately seek a stunning effect, though the nature of her work generally achieves that (Perron 2002). Haigood's early works especially, focused on tasks and precision while her later works presented sweeping choreographic scores of synchronized bodies moving across towering facades.

Project Bandaloop

Bandaloop dancers consider themselves to be “skydancers” (Frey 1999, 40). With a mixture of dancing and rock climbing, Bandaloop's site-specific emphasis celebrates natural environments. If the urban landscape does not seem geographically

“natural,” it is the natural or normal environment for those walking its streets daily. Bandaloop operates like a dance company, deliberately building a varied and sustainable repertory. Bandaloop dancers cross-train extensively in order to maintain the peak physical condition necessary for their work. Gymnastics, ballet, yoga, rock climbing – everything to develop strength and flexibility (Frey 1999).

Unlike a typical dance company, however, Bandaloop performs in commercial settings such as store openings or ribbon-cutting ceremonies for buildings. Additionally, their site work is not always specific to the site. Bandaloop takes choreography from place to place, revising it for each location. Thus, Bandaloop’s definition of site-specific is more connected to juxtaposing imagery from the natural or original site to an unnatural or secondary one. Reapplying site work lets Bandaloop expand and develop their movement vocabulary fully by testing it in new environments under varying conditions. Their work sites range from mountainsides to building façades. Bandaloop’s approach to movement and choreography is unique among its contemporaries as its focus and agenda are unpredictable. A quick visit to Bandaloop’s website announces that the company is currently on a rafting trip following a new project in India (Project Bandaloop 2009). While Bandaloop’s work is timely and connected to current events (similar to the nature of Trisha Brown or Joanna Haigood’s works), it places an emphasis on the future. Unlike Brown or Haigood, Bandaloop is negotiating a permanent position in the performing arts as an aerial troupe.

Aerial Dance: Choreographic Methods & Tools

Trapeze, Bungee & Rappelling

Aerial dance incorporates numerous apparatuses. For many site-specific works, ropes and harnesses are necessary simply for access to the site. Nets and trampolines are necessary as safety features in most works, but can also double as movement stimuli as seen in works by Elizabeth Streb. The apparatuses chosen for Streb's works become the central elements for her movement and work, whereas Project Bandaloop and Joanna Haigood must use harnesses and belays just to scale the surface upon which they wish to dance. Works for the proscenium stage can utilize more instruments simply because of the ability to build the necessary rigging and support system within the site of the stage. On the proscenium stage multiple trapezes (static or flying) at varying heights, with accompanying accessories such as hoops or straps, and silks or climbing ropes can be affixed and rearranged throughout the performance. The performers can leave the stage more freely than is possible for one of Haigood's dancers atop the face of a clock tower. Site-specific works do not always have the benefit of wings or transitions for the dancers involved. Nor can production staff easily adjust, clean or maneuver the apparatus. High in the air, the dancers must also be their own technicians.

Techniques

Choreographers use different aerial techniques depending on the meaning and context of their work. Site-specific works, or sites other than the concert stage, require immense logistical analysis and preparation. The choreographers must be highly strategic in planning the progression and layout of their work, as it usually cannot be readjusted or restarted once begun at the top of a building. Some site-specific works seek to highlight the site, with the dancers simply covering the space and illuminating aspects of the space, that perhaps remain unnoticed by regular passersby. Some site-specific works provide an

actual narrative constructed away from the site, then set upon it. Some are combinations that build from specific phrases of movement within the confines of the site. Aerial choreographers within the studio and stage can provide a spectacle of acrobatics and visual array through color, costumes and music. Performances may simply include an aerial portion or *divertissement* within a narrative of movement. Works that consist entirely of aerials are often shorter in length due to the limits of apparatus flexibility and performer endurance (Giovanelli 2009).

Aerial Dance: Cirque du Soleil & the Circus

Technique & Codification

Circuses around the world exist to shock-and-awe their audiences. Propelling the human body through air at an absurd height and speed is an essential requirement. The display of risk and fear are necessary for a stimulating performance. Most circus acts find a way to place the body in the air, from partner balancing acts that precariously stack bodies to the tight wire, which situates individuals as high as twenty feet in the air. The possibility to fall is almost always evident from the trapeze, rings or the Spanish Web.

Cirque du Soleil utilizes circus forms dependent on the human body to execute and adds technical elements for increased awe. Aerial performers present traditional aerial acts, such as the hanging silks, but are also attached to levers or cranes that can pull the entire apparatus higher off the ground. The speed and rotation of most cirque apparatus can also be adjusted beyond the performer's control. Thus, performers in Cirque du Soleil are not physically responsible for their entire performance. Cirque's show *Corteo* proudly used an unprecedented level of complicated rigging and technical mechanics. *Corteo* incorporated acrobatics, juggling, aerials and singing – providing a

new challenge for artists to multi-task vocally while suspended in the air (Arita 2009). While wildly theatrical, each Cirque show is executed with the precision of classical ballet. Cirque artists are chosen for their high level of expertise in gymnastics, dance or other acrobatic training and their ability to transform these skills to the extreme (Berardi 2002, 3). Even with the vast technical improvements in production, companies such as De La Guarda rely on condoms for the protective tubing for their microphones that must be able to survive the air travels of the dancers (Strom 2004, 11). Aerial artists still work from scratch in a few areas!

Studio Methods & Choreography

With the development of aerial apparatus and techniques, aerial dance became available to the amateur. Studios offer classes for dancers and non-dancers at varying levels of difficulty. Previously, aerial training would only be available to a few, select highly trained bodies. Now, anyone with the financial means can pursue aerial training. Fitness centers also capitalized on the aerial craze, offering trapeze classes. The appeal of such workouts for the participant is decreased boredom while exercising, development of new skills, and achieving a hardened performer's body. The explosion of dance on television also incorporates aerial stunt work for visual appeal and competition. Aerial work allows for an element of surprise in theatrical works that has the same appeal as the trap-door. Performers can disappear or escape the stage instantly, for the viewers' delight and amazement. Regarding her highly theatrical work, Los Angeles choreographer Josie Walsh said, "We're dance-based but we use circus arts to enhance choreographic opportunities – and to defy gravity (Looseleaf 2006, 46)."

Sustainability: Influences & Implications

As the Judson choreographers found site-specific work to be a solution to non-existent funding and resources, current choreographers are finding this remains true today. With the substantial amount of current site-specific choreography and choreographers, the field exists as its own entity within a greater field of the avant-garde and modern dance. Musical group the Black Eyed Peas executed a stunning self-labeled flash mob dance for Oprah's annual block party in Chicago. In a heavily strategized effort to surprise Oprah, lead singer will.i.am. recruited 800 volunteers to learn, practice and teach a choreographed dance to their hit "I Got a Feeling." At the performance, over 20,000 participants emerged to dance in an unbelievably well-executed display taking over Chicago's Michigan Avenue (Chi Town Project 2009). This performance shows that not all site-specific works stem from limited resources, but that extensive resources are not always necessary. This de-emphasis on resources greatly influences the sustainability of site-specific work. Site-specific works are much more adaptable to economic instability than purely aerial works are as they do not require specific equipment simply to guarantee safety.

However, the fusion of site-specific aerial work is precariously positioned. For companies such as Cirque du Soleil (not site-specific based), their work appears sustainable because of resources and talent. While companies similar to Cirque du Soleil exist, none of them pose great competition. As Cirque is well-established, it will continue to draw the best of the best to its stages. Companies combining aerial work within its site-specific choreography will face the challenge of developing new sites and innovating new ways of moving throughout the site. Dancers taking the initiative to train in aerial movement techniques have much to gain as they will be able to grow with the

field however they choose. In terms of supply and demand, more dancers with aerial training will allow current companies to progress more quickly and will stimulate the development of new companies.

Coming Down: Final Thoughts

Aerial dance is a viable practice within the field of dance. However, its practice and performance is still being defined. A fully functional form outside of site-specific choreography, aerial dance burgeoned with the expansion of site-specific choreography in a manner likely impossible in isolation. Passing through the filter of site-specific choreography, aerial dance became a necessary tool to create dance instead of simply an acrobatic device. Within the circus, aerial dance existed as a codified, legitimate acrobatic form. The structure of site-specific choreography allowed it to become an artistic medium. Aerially negotiating a site validated the use of aerial equipment and movement. Aerial dance became a means to an end for choreographers grappling to find a physical place for expression. With a use and need beyond circus spectacle, aerial dance became available as a form for artists struggling to identify their sense of movement within the confines of gravity.

While aerial dance will always attract those eager to learn a flashy trick or two, the ability to redefine balance and gravity will sustain its usage. Further development of aerial techniques will position dancers to expand their own physical and mental repertoire. I think aerial dance will remain captivating because it gives the viewer and the performer a sense of escape. As the human body moves while suspended above the ground, time and reason are suspended as well. The moving body takes the viewer and performer through a psychological journey of ecstasy of the unknown. Instead of

considering the unknown as ominous or intimidating, the unknown becomes an ebullient mode of expression traveling externally from the dancer's body internally to the minds and spirits of those watching.

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