

1-1-2013

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Phillips, M. J. (2013). Skipping against hegemony: Where are states of lightness in contemporary dance-making? In *Dance, young people and change: Proceedings of the daCi and WDA Global Dance Summit*. Braddon, Australia: Ausdance. Available [here](#)

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Skipping against hegemony: Where are states of lightness in contemporary dance-making?

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Abstract

Dance relies on physical ideas born out of human experience. Changes in what we “do” and “transmit” in the context of pedagogy should follow the shifting and informed perspectives of the time, reflecting scientific, sociological, and imaginative advancements and practices. One day, while a young girl skipped down a university pathway, that principle was brought into question. This innocent protagonist’s skipping provoked a search for explanations of the erasure of a complex “foundational” action from the grounds of adult knowledgeable behaviour. Could this dismissal of a physical idea bear any correspondences with a limited range of contemporary dance compositional modes detected in the latest Perth International Arts’ Festival in Australia? Productions like Falk and Van Dijk’s *Trust*, Platel’s *Out of Context: for Pina*, and Guerin’s *Human Interest Story*, while finely wrought excavations of human experience, stood in stark contrast to the playfulness of Teatro Sunil’s *Donka: A Letter to Chekhov*, a new circus piece. All the works dealt with human dysfunction, but the so-called dance works evinced impasses of doom, whereas *Donka*’s lightness of touch invited compassion for the absurdity of existence.

Why does modern/contemporary dance appear to stress seriousness in its dance-making processes? Is it a matter of proving disciplinary validity or has the discipline of dance become inadvertently too rigid and, consequently, hegemonic in subtle, unintended ways? This investigation examines issues of discipline legitimacy and relationships with socio-political conditions in an attempt to account for the apparent privileging of certain approaches in choreographic training. Philosophically, contemporary dance claims to be porous and profoundly committed to physical inclusivity, so why have quizzical clowns and skipping not been embraced by the discipline? These questions are not identical but this paper aims to explore their interdependency and the trail of incongruities left in their wake.

Keywords: dance composition, pedagogy, skipping, legitimacy, states of lightness

Skipping against hegemony: Where are states of lightness in contemporary dance-making?

Dance relies on physical ideas born out of human experience. Changes in what we “do” and “transmit” in the context of pedagogy should follow the shifting and informed perspectives of the time, reflecting scientific, sociological, and imaginative advancements and practices. However, what if there are imperceptible impediments to this dialectic between dancing and experience that unwittingly become embedded in pedagogical undertakings? Here, I am concerned with a possible neglect of light touches of humour and/or clowning in the

significant area of dance composition or choreographic development within professional contemporary dance training institutions. It is a delicate argument when this possible neglect is attributed not to the conscious intentions of individuals, disciplinary aspirations, nor even institutions *per se*, except inasmuch to suggest that each, across the pedagogical chain, has become swept up in the valid quest for legitimisation.

If it is possible to determine a point of departure for such ideas, it happened on the day I watched a young girl skip down a university pathway. This innocent protagonist's skipping provoked a search for explanations of the erasure of a complex "foundational" action from the grounds of adult knowledgeable behaviour. Could this dismissal of a physical idea bear any correspondence with a limited range of contemporary dance compositional modes detected in a recent Perth International Arts' Festival in Australia? Productions like Falk and Van Dijk's *Trust*, Platel's *Out of Context: for Pina*, and Guerin's *Human Interest Story*, while finely wrought excavations on human experience, stood in stark contrast with the playfulness of Teatro Sunil's *Donka: A Letter to Chekhov*, a physical theatre/circus piece. All the works dealt with human ineptitude and dysfunction, but the so-called dance works evinced impassés of doom, whereas *Donka*'s lightness of touch invited compassion for the absurdity of existence. Like the skipping girl, *Donka* appeared as both unusual and absolutely usual.

Is there a stress on aesthetic seriousness in current contemporary dance-making processes?

This question involves complex responses that touch upon deep-seated personal investments in a discipline's potentiality. My intention is to suggest that there are forces within society's values that impel certain behaviours which, paradoxically, may not be in the best interest of dance as a corporeal language to plumb knowledge of human experience. Arguably, testing the reaches of communication should be the nerve centre of any sort of compositional training. Dance practitioners' immediate responses to the subject of skipping and humour are to state that both are integral to learning and its repertoire, which on the surface is absolutely correct. However, in popular perception, skipping is intimately linked to child-like behaviour, while clowns tend to be synonymous with immature adults who fail, with comic effect, in inept and absurd endeavours. Neither activity is considered sophisticated and, more significantly, neither is regarded as a serious contributor to knowledge. In the shadows cast by these questions, legitimacy looms. Legitimacy gives shape to the serious dancer and dance-maker, one who tackles difficult explanations and analyses as ably, skilfully, and rigorously as any scientist, cultural theorist, or, particularly in our times, financial expert. In such contexts, dance-making and the courses that feed into the overall objective of legitimisation have, perhaps unwittingly, steered curricula into processes that eliminate the full expressive diversity of behaviour, generating a limited choreographic vocabulary that, I suggest, is currently taught in Australian vocational dance institutions.

The concept of legitimacy is, at base, contradictory: it disallows failure, edits out the bumps of the everyday in order to impose a superior status for all the crucial reasons of employability and viability. As Michel de Certeau has noted, academic disciplines are defined by "what they have taken care to exclude from their field in order to constitute it" (cited in Kolb, 2011, p. 7). Philosophically, contemporary dance claims to be porous and profoundly committed to physical inclusivity, so why have quizzical clowns and Isadora Duncan's skipping not been

openly embraced by the discipline? This paper aims to explore the incongruities and invisible hegemonic forces lying behind this question.

Perhaps a nod towards historical records might provide a starting point to examine this claim to physical inclusivity. Modern dance's formative expressions from Martha Graham, Rudolf von Laban, Mary Wigman, Valska Gert, Kurt Jooss, Jose Limon, and through to the experimentation of Pina Bausch, Edouard Lock, Garry Stewart, and Alain Platel have had a penchant for the darker sides of human experience. Many motivational factors came into play for the discipline's forebears, such as the need for these pioneers to distinguish their new dancing from balletic and dance-hall conventions via their commitment to its serious and artistic nature. The erosion of traditional values through industrialisation, wars, and economic crises during the first half of the 20th century undoubtedly contributed further to a growing fascination with dark themes. Metaphorically, a disciplinary genetic tendency emerged, wedded to ideas of bodies contorted by the forces of modernity. Certainly, seriousness has stamped the genre's efforts to gain legitimacy within the canons of aesthetic forms.

Additionally, I suspect that the genre's inclinations towards psychological and intellectual seriousness are indirectly influenced by the ancient Greek privileging of tragedy over comedy. According to John Morreall, Western thinkers, with a few exceptions (e.g. Democritus and Nietzsche), have argued for wisdom's alignment with serious intellectual pursuits, correlating the division between tragedy and comedy in terms of social class, wherein the weighty and noble tragedy belongs to educated aristocrats, and comedy is delegated to the common people. "But that is all part of the traditional prejudice against comedy. Judged fairly, the comic vision reveals at least as much wisdom as the tragic," said Morreall (p. 1098). Curiously, rebellious characteristics often attributed to modern/contemporary dance exponents also figures in the list of comic attributes: "The questioning of authority, mental flexibility, playfulness and the value of life" (*ibid*) that have historically threatened institutions have led to a suppression of comedy in many cultures. Rebels, it seems, turn up in all sorts of guises. Nevertheless, it is puzzling that modern/contemporary dance-makers, excluding exceptions like Gert, Weidman, and Kylian, seem to have skipped over the expressive weaponry of comic lightness.

Hopefully, these historical allusions, however scant, indicate how the unseen force of legitimacy may have had a hand in shaping the situation today.

Shift to the 21st century

At one remove from my concern with legitimisation processes is the rather more vehement discourse in education and sociological circles of a post-capitalist condition known as "neoliberal managerialism" (Davies, 2005). Academics here claim that intellectual inquiry has given way to the rule of individual and corporate entrepreneurship taken up by governments and establishments like universities. According to Davies, with whom I agree:

It is very risky to buy into, uncritically, the language of those who would govern us through the manipulation of funds and the tying of dollar values to each aspect of

our work. In speaking ourselves into existence as academics, within neoliberal discourse, we are vulnerable to it and to its indifference to us and to our thought. It can become the discourse through which we, not quite out of choice and not quite out of necessity, make judgements, form desires, make the world into a particular kind of (neoliberal) place. (2005, p. 1)

However, I suggest that current conditions are more deeply ingrained and are, contradictorily, complicated by the very visionaries who have fought against the status quo. Davies (2005) acknowledges the figure of the disruptive “clown” but she fails to notice that clowns may be disappearing precisely because educators are pressured to fight for legitimisation with a language and behaviour that negates ineptitude. To attain status and accountability, thus funding support for survival or disciplinary excellence, educators are forced to engage in “serious” discourse. Commitment, dedication, and critical application are constructive behavioural traits within any social formation, but when seriousness and the connotations of “rigour” begin to limit the diverse means of communication and expression, I believe that we have to re-imagine human possibility.

Curricula for composition or legitimacy?

The focus of this discussion is dance composition in vocational or pre-professional tertiary education, specifically institutions of equivalence with my home institution, the Western Australia Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA), where an undergraduate BA (Dance) degree functions as a conduit to professional careers in contemporary dance performance, choreography, and related avenues, such as teaching. The philosophical base of the degree relies on the centrality of performance in the development of technique (contemporary and ballet), together with compositional acuity. Within a dense programme of technique, choreography, and scientific and cultural analysis, there are three main production seasons, two devoted to the embodiment of remounted or new work by staff and guest choreographers, and, the third, a programme of third-year students’ choreographic work. In contrast to liberal arts’ degrees, where so-called theoretical units largely conform to academic conventions, the pre-professional environment of practice is constantly faced with issues of legitimisation and not necessarily in a straightforward manner.

Justification pressures are ever-present. How does the intense focus on physicality develop students’ critical faculties or desired graduate attributes from adaptability and communication (new technologies) to cultural (ethnic) understanding? What are the graduate employment statistics? What are the department’s research outputs? And even more insidiously, how does investment in this type of education, which is spatial, temporal, and human resource-intensive, stand up to economic scrutiny? At an evidence-based level, administration becomes onerous and tends to reduce disciplinary passions into a never-ending cycle of justification. The playfulness and risk-positive nature of staff creativity tends to wither in the face of institutional expectations of graduate success and functional engagement with the problems of the day.

This environment resonates with Becky Dyer’s observations on dance teaching in the US context:

Prevalent teaching structures and movement aesthetics appear to imitate aspects of the larger governed and regulated, techno-industrial-focused American culture, which intensely concerns itself with establishing order; getting productive results; achieving reliability; ensuring repeatable outcomes; determining consequences; applying justice; and engaging in efficient, fast-paced learning that is coupled with accurate demonstrations of acquired knowledge. Prevalent movement tendencies and teaching and learning approaches appear to reflect a cultural drive to obtain things and for individuals to control themselves, the outcome of their lives, and often the lives of others. (Dyer, 2009, p. 117)

Dyer's project argues for the value of somatic approaches in developing each student's unique personality and aesthetic values. Ironically, Dyer's solution conforms, in its own way, to the rhetoric of legitimisation. If dancers' technical training is contained within an imbalance of traditional teaching and somatic and improvisatory approaches, may not changes in that balance also be perceived as further binding imaginative creations by virtue of another "serious" mode of validation more or less enforced upon the discipline? Dyer's effort to evade the strangle-hold of cultural imperatives for success, like my search to find a place for lightness and ineptitude, invariably become subsumed in the legitimising project where rhetoric and actuality do not necessarily converge. Advocating individualistic and "true" personal expression carries its own socio-political burden of evaluation, its own serious and conservative containment.

Also worth contemplating is Jill Green's observation that "dance is often thought of as a 'freeing' art form, whereby performers use the body to 'express' themselves in a myriad of ways. Artists in general are often considered renegades who break rules, and free us from an imposed dominant culture" (2001, p. 156). Green, again, focuses on teaching behaviour in technique classes, but I consider her comments to apply equally, if not more tellingly, in composition classes. Freedom, particularly in terms of rebellious behaviour, is extremely difficult to tolerate in rule-governed institutions. I face this conundrum daily in postgraduate studies and concur with Green's view that it is uncommon to find dance educators reflecting on how power generated from the teacher's personal need of validation feeds into how they mould student bodies and standardise bodily behaviour in class. If physicality is tempered by the relations of power between teacher and student, how exacerbated might this be in a creative context where potent values of the institution and society are more visible?

Interfaces of success and failure

While the differentials of acceptability and power raised by Dyer and Green ring true in terms of the discipline's enlargement, all are subtly trapped in the contradictory web of the rhetoric of success. I use the term "rhetoric" deliberately and hesitantly. "Rhetoric" circulates as the sum total of ideas, concepts, and beliefs broadcast within institutions and across national media, and fosters notions that everyone "succeeds" in a "win-win" situation; consequently, I am intrigued by means that may reverse the legitimacy principle in a concept of failure. Le Feuvre writes from a visual arts perspective, but, in referring to Beckett, the clowning issue is forcefully enunciated:

If perfection and idealism are satisfying, failure and doubt are engaging, driving us into the unknown. When divorced from a defeatist, disappointed or unsuccessful position, failure can be shifted away from being merely a category of judgment ... Rather than producing a space of mediocrity, failure becomes intrinsic to creating open systems and raising searching questions: without the doubt that failure invites, any situation becomes closed and in danger of becoming dogmatic ... Beckett's advice in *Worstward Ho* (1983) is to keep on trying even if the hope of success is dashed again and again by failure: 'Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter, Try Again. Fail again. Fail better.'" (Le Feuvre, 2010, p. 13)

Beckett transformed theatrical practice and, philosophically, enabled defeatism to be an avenue of strange, inextricable hope. Revealingly, he and his characters never relinquished the necessity to continue through this thing known as failure. He is, in my estimation, a quintessential clown: "Whatever else they do, clowns seem to acknowledge from behind their masks of ineptitude the resolute untidiness of being human, and they advise us to keep playing at all costs" (Weitz, 2012, p. 87).

Contradictions proliferate

Failure treated as above is, oddly, the sustenance of success. Even in the neoliberal rhetoric, openness to vulnerability by way of audacious risk-taking is said to be celebrated. By the same token, actual failure is not tolerated by the social environment, and for this discussion, by students and teachers in composition classes. While this statement may seem harsh in a non-judgemental environment, my point is that both educators and students, in various acculturated ways, require success/approval. Roisin O'Gorman and Margaret Werry frame this idea in general terms:

[T]he threat of failure is the defining condition under which we (not just students but also teachers and institutions) operate. In these contexts, accidental failure is perilous, and the strategic, emancipatory or experimental use of failure – however much it is still necessary – is freighted with risk, danger and difficulty ... The right to fail (with all its promise of inclusiveness, generosity, freedom) can only be claimed at an ever-mounting cost ... failure is often disavowed and internalized, mired in blame and shame. (O'Gorman and Werry, 2012, p. 3)

Choreographic education encompasses a combination of basic compositional building blocks, the disciplinary canon, and, logically, the students' own endeavours in this complex art. No-one can fault such intentions, especially when educators stress the imaginative playing field or when the canon experienced includes the Becketts and the Chaplins of this world alongside the de Keersmeakers, Balanchines, and so forth. Acceptance or rejection of playfulness depends upon what is given value. One factor that I have come to appreciate in the WAAPA approach is the complex selection of repertory for students as they progress through their year levels. Apart from financial limitations, which impede invitations to international choreographers, there is the impossibility of knowing just what a choreographer will produce as a new work for students. Most guest choreographers are sensitive to the need to extend students' technical and emotional investment in performance and thus produce works geared to those ends. Critically, few choreographers will embark on experiments in humour and

lightness. Their brief is to demonstrate a serious engagement with student development, as well as to investigate possibilities of their own practice, neither of which invites (except in rare cases) experimentation in other than serious modes of composition. What guest choreographers present becomes, in turn, blueprints for students in their choreographic explorations. The circle of serious engagement, thus, turns upon itself.

A further restraint in delivering compositional pedagogies is time. Pre-professional performative environments demand intensive day and sometimes night face-to face-teaching. The success criterion involves elite training which is intricate, exhausting, and expensive. Seriousness again underlines what needs to be taught, how, and with what frequency. The core disciplines of technique and compositional basics tend to overwhelm other aspects of the curricula that, though accorded their significance in imbuing young minds with the breadth of knowledge ideally required by the discipline, simply do not happen. Students are given tastes of such physicalities, but not their compositional possibilities.

So *how* can an individual, dance department, or discipline skip against the might of legitimacy? How can playfulness, childlike acts of discovery, and insight into failure be welcomed into the dance studio? Stormann, writing against corporations' current commodification of play and the currency of selling culture back to the people who are the crucible of that culture, suggests that to restore the elemental expressions of human creativity will require a social and ecological upheaval. Ultimately, hierarchy must be altered socially, for it is a cultural creation (Stormann, 2010, p. 239). That sounds like a call to revolt.

Or is there some crazy (clownish?) way of dismantling the political right and left, and the hierarchical up and down by following the rocky, lonely road of Chaplin's tramp, his gesture, rhythm, and pattern stoically continuing somewhere – failing better. Although inadmissible in the morass of political, social, and academic structures, as McKnight notes in his article on Joyce's Bloom and Chaplin's tramp, the gestural rhythms of these two figures captivate their audiences. Ironically, "marginality, absurdity, and negligible effectuality become immediacy, preeminence, and spherical presence and solidity in the characters' quest for identity and significance" (McKnight, 2008, p. 494).

There is something profound in such a light touch of rebuttal of all the legitimate ways of the world. You might say that, in such moments, ineptitude dances or skips down a pathway of knowledge.

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All citations of this paper from this source should include the following information:

In S.W. Stinson, C. Svendler Nielsen & S-Y. Liu (Eds.), *Dance, young people and change: Proceedings of the daCi and WDA Global Dance Summit*. Taipei National University of the Arts, Taiwan, July 14th – 20th 2012. <http://www.ausdance.org/> [Accessed on xx date]
ISBN 978-1-875255-19-1