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Rethinking Dance Landmarks: An Interview with Netta Yerushalmy about Paramodernities



Netta Yerushalmy's *Paramodernities*. Photo by Arnaud Falchier

Part of the creation of *Devouring Devouring*, a 2012 piece by New York based dance maker Netta Yerushalmy, involved communicating long-distance via video with dancer Ofir Yudilevitch, based in Tel Aviv. Yerushalmy and Yudilevitch would take turn watching the video that the other sent, interpreting and retranscribing movements before sending a new version back to the other. In one sequence of *Helga and the Three Sailors* (2014), Yerushalmy recreated familiar gestures from her dancing self as a child from a home video projected on a screen. Questions of translation, interpretation, transgression and memory permeate her work and are also at play in *Paramodernities*, a new multidisciplinary

project co-presented by Hope Mohr Dance/The Bridge Project and ODC Theater this week.

Paramodernities is a “series of lecture-performances, or dance-experiments, generated through deconstructions of landmark modern choreographies, performed alongside contributions by scholars and writers who situate these iconic works and artists within the larger project of Modernism.” Yerushalmy will present her installments devoted to Vaslav Nijinsky, Alvin Ailey, and Merce Cunningham at ODC. With this work, Yerushalmy questions how the dancing body situates itself within the politics of dance history and what ideologies these iconic works generate and perpetuate. Yerushalmy and I talked over the phone last week. Below is an edited version of our conversation.

Marie Tollon: How did this project start?

Netta Yerushalmy: It started in 2013, in Berlin, where I was living for about eight months. As I was about to leave Berlin, there was a call for proposals to submit ideas for responses to the original *Rite of Spring* by [Vaslav] Nijinsky’s on the occasion of its centennial, with performances at the Hebbel am Ufer (HAU) in Berlin. The thing I was working on at the time had to do with learning a lot of material from videos, of myself as a child and of other artists. The idea came to me that I would learn from video the *Rite of Spring* as we know it, which is only through the reconstruction that the Joffrey Ballet did in the eighties—we don’t actually know what the *Rite of Spring* looks like. I would have this naïve approach of just watching a screen, teaching myself what was on the screen and then completely reshuffle and reorder all of the movements. And I would take away the music. That was my conceptual/embodyed response to that original work. And then the idea came about that my deconstruction would be on a parallel track with a read essay by a scholar and that the essay would be relevant but would not be describing what I’m doing. I was really interested in the confusing proposals of watching dance and listening to theory at the same time and contemplating the original, iconic thing you are talking about, but that is not there.

MT: And then from that first experience with *Rite of Spring* you decided to extend the project to other iconic works?

NY: I performed that version in New York City at the Judson Church inside of my community. The responses were exciting because people didn't really know what it was that I was doing but were really interested in it. There were still so many unanswered questions about the project that it incited me to want to do more.

MT: Did you choose these specific works because they had a particular influence on you or because they are landmarks of dance history?

NY: Mostly because of the second reason. I was raised dancing in Israel. I didn't necessarily have an intimate relationship with some of these works because a lot of these modernists are American. The thing that did feel personal was that within a wider notion of the modern dance canon, in the end, I had to land on a short list of artists and a work that spoke to me as an artist—in the case of [Martha] Graham for example, there are many works that I could have selected, and I chose *Night Journey*. In that moment my personal proclivities came in. But in general it was not about what influenced me but about conversations with a lot of people in the field -curators, dancers, dance historians, teachers- and asking people: What constitutes our canon? And a lot of hours at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center looking at works and interviews and seeing what was unavoidable, what was almost static – because these works reached that status of artifact and a codified language in an institution was built around them.

MT: How did you go about with this material?

NY: For each installment we study the entire dance, we try to learn every movement. For *Night Journey*, I studied every single movement that everybody does. For Fosse, we studied all the movements that are in the film. We don't end up doing all of them on stage but we learn the entire dance. So it's not about what I want to do, it's about the piece in its entirety, the physical expression in this moment for this artist.

MT: Can you talk about the recomposition that happens then?

NY: It's different for every installment that I am working on. All the movements are learned mimetically, with video, and then I devise different methods to rearrange them—a weaving, a chance (sort of putting everything in the blender). The dancers don't contribute any

movement to the piece, the original movements just get rearranged. There are different conceptual and methodological frameworks that we impose on them in relationship to the thing that we are doing. With [Alvin] Ailey, the gospels are so integral to what the dance is that instead of taking a dance step, I took an 8-count phrase of music, and that became a unit. I had maybe a hundred units like this and then we mixed up their order entirely.

MT: During your research, did you learn something about these works that was unexpected?

NY: Well one thing that came up in a lot of conversations about [Merce] Cunningham was the dispelling of this mythology of chance as such a present aspect of his work. People who know his work intimately have said to me that he did use chance perhaps more when he was stuck, or as a way to access something that was outside of culture, but it was not his general methodology. So basically the conversations I've had emphasized that his *oeuvre* is not the result of a bunch of indeterminacy and whatever-ness, but rather results very much from intuition on his part and an intention to make things just so.

MT: Choreographer Neil Greenberg, who attended some of your rehearsals at the Baryshnikov Arts Center, noted how you directed the dancers to “turn the volume down’ on their dancing during a particular section of the text, to avoid ‘putting pressure on what [the scholar] is saying.’” What did you intend for the relationship between text and movement to be?

NY: It's super complicated because you have a layer of information within what the person is saying and a layer of information within what the dancer is doing, and those are huge buckets of information and expression. And sometimes they relate very directly and sometimes they don't. I could be doing a sequence of movements that is about violating Graham's chronological narrative or the integrity of the separate roles in a narrative that relates to Greek drama and the scholar could be talking about a personal experience that's on a different register. In that moment they are not mirroring each other at all. There's the desire for them to both be present at the same time without them nearing or being in direct relationship to one another.

But I have to find a way on the level of information to compose all of this: when do things emerge movement-wise and when do things emerge textually and thematically, and how to make space for the brain to hear and see, especially when things are not in conflict. And then there is also choreography and the energy of the body of the scholar, where they are in space, what kind of movement they produce, how to integrate that or not. The scholar gets swallowed in the arena of performance where certain things are heightened— what the body is doing, what is happening in time, where people are on stage, where they are looking, etc. And there is also the vocal content, which has to be woven into that, so it's quite complicated.

MT: Did you use texts that already existed?

NY: No, they are all written for the project.

MT: You have questioned the “unavoidable failures” embedded in the project—for example working with dancers not necessarily trained in the form that they are dancing. Can you talk more about these failures and what do they give rise to?

NY: I used this word more in the beginning. The striving for a form that is often outside of you is embedded in the very practice of being a dancer. It is vertical transmission. In this project we try to do what the Ailey dancers are doing on video and most of us fail at it. At the same time, I refined it a bit because in the end I work with people who *are* quite proficient. They might not be expert at any of these genres, but they do have a technical experience that allows them to approach these works. In terms of your question about failure, somebody in the Graham company looking at me would say: “What is she doing? That’s not *Night Journey...*” But the more general eye still doesn’t consider it a failure. I think that it’s important for me to stress the fact that none of us are experts. I have not hired Graham dancers to do Graham. At this point most dancers are mutts. Our bodies are infused with layers and layers and layers of movement pathways and ideologies, and the idea is to let them take flight with the information they get from the video and from their experience in life. In some sections the ‘failure’ or gap is a bit more apparent. When I do the Ailey [installment] I feel like a complete failure but it also has to do with the cultural, where I personally feel my place is and where I feel a foreigner.

MT: These questions of translation, transmission and lineage often come up when a ballet company restages a work by Graham for example and the question whether these bodies trained in a different technique can perform the work “authentically” always comes up.

NY: Well I’m not really concerned with restaging at all. For me it’s more —What can I get from this lineage? What is another way to interact with these legacies and how can that be a moving conversation that involves subversion and not just submission. If it is just about holding them in this castle, ok, that’s what’s necessary so that I can always go see *Appalachian Spring* and it will look like whatever makes it what it is. But, what other access can we have, and also, what are these old ideologies enacting on dancers now, still?

MT: You have talked about the ongoing sense of violence and reverence in this project. How did you navigate the play between those two?

NY: What we just talked about—me taking the videos and learning them as best as I can, knowing that we don’t have an expert telling us how to do it- that’s an act of reverence and violence. Also taking away the music, the choreography, the costumes, anything that makes it meaningful, but caring about it, as a part of our shared history, enough to think about it with other people, and to integrate it within a larger conversation, that’s violence and reverence. Let me talk about *Night Journey* through a different lens so that I both respect and use it as a cultural artifact but I also violate it and potentially change its meaning or disrupt how the powers-that-be want me to think of it or remember it or make meaning of it.

MT: Is there anything else you want to add?

NY: The world premiere is at Jacob’s Pillow August 8th-12th, 2018, so it’s important to keep the research and experimentation of it at play here while hosted by the Bridge Project/ ODC. You and I talked a lot about Graham’s *Night Journey*, but this week in San Francisco we’re performing Nijinsky, Ailey and Cunningham. The Cunningham one will have wild-card contributions by local scholars and artists, so that aspect is exciting in that it involves indeterminacy in the verbal contribution.

The point of the project is to put things side by side, to re-think Ailey and see Cunningham on one side and Nijinsky on the other. What does it feel like to consider the legacy as a horizontal thing and not as the chronological historicized narrative that we know? The horizontal, Para, “side by sidedness” is the magic and the meat of the project. How does the contemporary body experience that horizontality?