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AXIS DANCE COMPANY

The Anxiety and the Afterglow

BY DORAN GEORGE

When I invited a friend to the performance by AXIS dance company, an “ensemble of performers with and without disabilities”(1), it was shocking when she confessed to being too sensitive to watch people “who’d suffered such misfortune.” Naively, perhaps, I’d assumed there would be general consensus that this was one of the more conventionally beautiful pieces of dance to be performed in Los Angeles this year. As disability performance scholar Petra Kuppers, pointed out in the panel before the performance, AXIS presents “people who are in very different power relations traditionally” (2), and people’s conceptions of beauty are intimately tied up with power.

As the lights went up on dancers Rodney Bell, Janet Das, Sonsheree Giles, and Alice Sheppard, the question of whether their performances would “change the way [we] think about dance and the possibilities of the human body forever” (3) was front and center. How satisfying it would be to witness



AXIS Dance Company in rehearsal: Dancers Sonsheree Giles, Rodney Bell, Alice Sheppard, Judith Smith, Lisa Bufano. Photo courtesy the Maggie Allesee National Center for Choreography.

choreography smash through the discourse of disability as pathos. Historically, concert dance has constructed an idealized body to the exclusion of the disabled subject and in fact depended upon that exclusion to shore up the circumscription and idealization of “ability” (4). This construction is what makes companies like AXIS so exciting but also what makes the fulfilling of their revolutionary claims so difficult.

In the three works—“Room with No View,” “Vessel,” and “Point to Something”—that the company presented at a performance in Glory Kaufman Hall at UCLA on February 17, different strategies in movement language were deployed to engage both the dancers who do and those who do not use wheelchairs. In Sonya Delwaide’s “Room with No View,” points of contact between the performers were explored, through unison and duet, achieving a certain subsuming of “difference” within the compositional meter of the dancing: truncated upward retractions of the dancer’s downward extended arms,



AXIS Dance Company in “Vessel” choreographed by Alex Ketley.
Dancers Alice Sheppard, Rodney Bell, Janet Das, & Sonsheree Giles. Photo by Andrea Flores.

pulsating in rhythm with a horizontal sliding forward and backward of the head, as they were carried in profile across the stage by all company members; time, perambulation, space, and soundtrack were all informed by the conformity of beat passing through body. Two walked and two wheeled in a simple equanimity that was reflected in the arm gestures, which may have been an aesthetic reference to locomotion of the chairs' wheels.

Yet when Das and Giles broke away to execute floor work and handstands engineered from their legs, Bell and Sheppard appeared bound to their wheelchairs and restricted to movement of the upper body. The percussive section, which had felt like common ground before, now seemed like choreography that was limited, in service of integration, by what the wheelchair users couldn't do. This led to a reading of the piece in which those who were "fully abled" were placed in comparison to those who were "dis-abled," and the former were found to excel. Entering the modern dance stage, as it

has in the latter part of the twentieth century, the "disabled subject" is too easily viewed as imitating its able-bodied counterpart in work that recapitulates traditions of virtuosity.

AXIS artistic director Judith Smith suggests that after multiple viewings of the company's performances, however, "ability" is what audiences see rather than disability (5). This suggests that other readings of the choreography are possible and that the wheelchair users are contributing to the vocabulary of movement in a way that would leave the dances sorely impoverished if they were not there. This was evident in sharp turns the wheelchair users made and a daring tip Sheppard executed a number of times in which her whole weight—including her chair—balanced delicately on her toes and the tips of her foot plates. At another point in the performance, Bell was out of his wheelchair and maneuvered his pelvis in unison with Giles. The clarity of weight falling through his pelvis, compared to the more "held" maneuver Giles made, was admirable.

At times Bell and Sheppard tipped their chairs such that the undercarriage faced up into the audience and their chests were splayed open on the floor. In making this motion, as well as subsequent twists in this position with upturned chair following torso, both dancers enacted authority over not only their body/machinery but also their social significance. A fallen wheelchair and a body struggling within it became a conscious articulation of skill and aesthetic, both referring to and superseding the distress this action would signify within a discourse of disability as pathos. Because bodies never materialize under only one axis of identity, the potential for this kind of resignification entails a tricky navigation of identity politics, as a more detailed reading of a moment in Giles' choreography of "Point to Something" indicates.

Following a romantic rift, Bell pushes Das away and tracks downstage leaving her behind, and seconds feel like hours as he looks blankly (?) or defensively (?) into the

audience. In the encounter between male and female, gender, power, and vulnerability are unsettled by the insertion of a carriage of metal and rubber into the narrative. It is a relief when she approaches him and Screamin' Jay Hawkins begins crooning "I Put a Spell on You." Despite Hawkins authorship and the presence of his voice, the song is also Nina Simone's signature song, and so, there's a feeling of the reversal of gender here. A lamentation of feminine vulnerability is now sung by a black man ventriloquized through the body of a Maori in a wheelchair.

Reluctantly but powerfully, Bell grasps Das's reaching wrist. She maneuvers herself onto the floor and he picks up his wheelchair in a wheelie—with his and the chair's weight both falling through the delicate axis of the larger wheels at the back. The front stabilizers are now at the height of his chest, and he begins to wheel his way over her supine body. The vulnerability of her flesh beneath him is brought into sharp relief by the several audible intakes of breath in the audience. Some

spectators aren't sure he'll make it and indeed, the weight tips that bit too far on either side of the delicate well-oiled fulcrum—this could never be a smooth passage. Images of metal falling on and penetrating flesh are vivid in the mind's eye, and an imaginary act of coitus is achieved. However, this symbolic coitus occurs not between these two bodies (for if I say body, I'm sure you'll separate out the man from the chair), but between prosthetic and flesh, between able-bodied and disabled subjects.

The potentially disturbing restoration of Bell's masculinity against Das's femininity is complicated by the political and cultural racialization and disabling of his gendered identity. The historical racialization of the "male gaze" between black men and white women in the US upsets any easy dichotomization of the operations of power in this representation of desire, an upsetting which is redoubled by the simultaneously castrating and penetrating prosthetic of the wheelchair. This moment provokes political

anxiety about Das's passivity and Bell's (exotic?) virility, but simultaneously bequeaths a palpable afterglow from the reversal due to his "misfortune." In a sexual reading of this dance "repetitions of hegemonic forms of power" in his penetration of her "fail to repeat loyally and, in that failure, open up the possibilities for resignifying the terms of violation against their violating aims" (7).

It is the skills developed while maneuvering through the world in a wheelchair (when the world has historically been imagined as an obstacle course for the disabled) that makes possible the slalom of resignification for the wheelchair user as disabled subject. The work *AXIS* presented demonstrates how these skills can be re-deployed in new dance vocabularies that can both contribute to and rework existing techniques developed for the idealized "able body." To the degree that this practice undermines canonical modern dance vocabulary, it quite literally "enables" a new space for dance, and a reconfiguration of

bodily relations within it, working against the historical exclusion of the disabled subject. In Alex Ketley's "Vessel," wheelchairs are directed at times by users Sheppard and Bell with a transparent discernment of the relationship between tire traction and weight, such that elegant shifts in their body/machinery support spins and lifts in the bodies of Das and Giles. Similarly, in Delwaide's "Room," Das and Giles deftly counterweight Sheppard and Bell and their chairs, at times creating moving acts of balance.

Such moments of mutual interdependence between dancers who do and do not use wheelchairs complicate the terms "able-bodied" and "disabled," for they produce a collaborative body which neither subject can achieve in isolation. Dance might be understood here as creating a new bodily ideal, even a new identity, based in a hybridization—or at the very least destabilization of—the previously bifurcated terms. Moreover, there are myriad moments, too many to mention here, throughout the

repertory of AXIS that upset, reverse, or otherwise disturb the binaries between the "abled" and "dis-abled" subject.

Doran George has been funded, commissioned and presented as an artist in Britain, Continental Europe and the US. Doran regularly curates cutting edge performance and events, has danced for a diversity of choreographers and is published in several print and web based journals and art publications. Doran has taught at major Universities, Art Colleges and Dance Centers in the UK, US, the Netherlands and Portugal and is currently reading for a PhD in Culture and Performance in the department of World Arts and Cultures at UCLA looking at the impact of somatic practice on modern concert dance.

Credits for photos on page 17: from left to right, "AXIS Dance Company dancers Sonsheree Giles and Judith Smith," photo by Trib LaPrade; "AXIS Dance Company dancers Judith Smith and Sonsheree Giles," photo by Trib LaPrade; "AXIS Dance Company in 'Vessel' choreographed by Alex Ketley, with dancers Sonsheree Giles and Rodney Bell," photo by Andrea Flores.

NOTES

1. AXIS Dance Company: prepare to leave all your preconceptions at the door, Glorya Kaufman Hall, February 17, 2010.
2. "Choreographing Disability" panel, Glorya

Kaufman Hall, February 17, 2010.

3. AXIS Dance Company: prepare to leave all your preconceptions at the door, Glorya Kaufman Hall, February 17, 2010.
4. Here I'm borrowing Judith Butler's notion in *Bodies That Matter* (London: Routledge, 1993) of "the construction of the human" [as] a differential operation that produces the more and the less "human," the inhuman, the humanly unthinkable" (8), where the dancing body has signified the ideal against which the subject of disability operates as one of the "excluded sites" that "come to bound the "human" as its constitutive outside" (8).
5. Interview with Susan Foster, Professor, World Arts and Cultures at UCLA, February 17, 2010.
6. In the post-show discussion, Sonsheree Giles mentioned feeling that explicit reference to the sexuality of people in wheelchairs is important considering the way they are configured as unable to be sexual.
7. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 124.