

# CHOCOLATE AND LIPSTICK: GENDER (RE)CONSTRUCTION IN DANCING DOCS AND DANDIES

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Contemporary drama criticism in Canada and elsewhere, like all contemporary literary criticism, is working to redefine the relationship between writing and reception, between the artifact and the process. In theatre studies, especially in performance studies, such interrogation immediately confronts the fraught space of the body on stage: questions of the materiality of the body of the actor, the continuum between a theoretical and somatic body, the conflict between notions of the body as essential or constructed, the larger issue of a constructed reality itself. To study drama as literature quite apart from these questions of the physical theatre is, of course, possible and rewarding; but, as theatre is a performance art, many critics today find it necessary to situate their analyses (even of text and literary matters) in an actual performance, real or imagined. To do so presents special problems: how can one assume a common spectatorship of the material under discussion? how can one assume a common interpretation of performance in any two productions? how can one assume any particular spectatorship among the audience members? These questions are not simply academic; they inform the style of criticism which can be brought forward, its methodology, and its likelihood of success.

Discussions of identity of any kind immediately confront these theoretical problems, particularly the question of whether identity is constructed or somehow essential (either to the body in performance or to the literary or theatrical conventions in use). Much has been written on this subject. Currently, there is some turning away from absolute positions on this issue to the notion that identity, like history, is constructed of materials which may express some habitual (if not essential) nature. Susan Leigh Foster, for example, employing French Post-Structuralist theory and speak-

ing of dancers, sees a "vision of the body's movement as an act of writing" (237). She argues that the body comes into being through "participation in a given discourse [of rehearsal and performance]" (237); for her, such a body is oppositional to the body of the dancer in the real world.

The application of this opinion to the rehearsal process of any play is clear and would appear to be a seductive notion for anyone interested in both literature and performance—for a critic of drama as literature. It seems undeniable, as Foucault and Barthes have suggested, that a link exists between the act of writing and the formation of identity in the writer. And it is also clear that the *persona* of the author (even if distinct from the narrator) is not identical to the real identity of the writer in daily life. It seems equally likely that the creation of a physical performance—dance or theatre—similarly discovers and understands itself within its making. But some important questions arise.

In a new study, *The Male Dancer*, Ramsay Burt provides a general overview of various theories on the subject of identity. In a critique of Foster's position, he points out that the creation of a body within the discourse of class, rehearsal and performance begs the question of how that same body is/has been formed in the real world. If choreographers (or directors) create "whatever relationship between subject and body suits their creative purpose," says Burt, they cannot simultaneously mediate "socially constructed norms" which influence and form the dancers' personal identities and bodies (46). The question of the agency of a dancer's or actor's body in the process of creation, then, becomes more complex. It seems clear that the body acts to create character (normally in drama and often in dance). It is also possible, though less clear to many spectators, that the body is an agent in the creation of the artifact of the performance itself. Burt cites Nijinsky as an example of a dancer who changed the form by his particular athletic abilities (Chapter 4); the British avant-garde dance troupe, DV8, seems to be changing the form of postmodern dance by its use of bodies to deconstruct the very idea of dance. David Freeman's paraplegic characters in *Creeps*, Thompson Highway's Nanabush doubling as exaggerated woman and mythological figure in *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapaskasing*, Morris Panych's neurotic protagonist unable to control his shoes as they take his feet up, around and over the set in *The Necessary Steps*, all use their bodies to create the very plays in which they are expressed. If such bodies do influence the forms they express, and if, as Judith Butler and others have established,

these bodies are culturally constructed, then it follows that the forms are also culturally constructed. Such a statement is by now a post-modern cliché, but not all those who believe it to be true have come to accept it through viewing bodies in performance as crafters of the forms they inhabit. (There are, of course, other ways to arrive at the same conclusion; for example, by looking at which forms have entered the canon and have, therefore, been codified and replicated.) To look at the institutionalization of certain forms as a product of the social construction of bodies in performance—by means of a cohesion of these two theories—seems a particularly valuable way to examine dance and those physical aspects of theatre which share with dance.

Tied to these two positions is a third to which Burt alludes and which seems almost a necessary adjunct: the question of whether dance and movement in theatre somehow capture a purely aesthetic experience, occupying a purely aesthetic register. There are many who would argue that they do (and that music does also). Susanne Langer allowed in 1953 that meditation on dance might permit the viewer to construe meaning within the gestures, but insisted that such meaning arises from a position before language, from an intuition. Only after this initial aesthetic response does the reader, according to Langer, enter into contemplation which “gradually reveals the complexity of the piece” (329). Maxine Sheets, whose phenomenological theory Burt discusses, sees dance as abstracted from life and “speaks of the ‘import’ of form thus abstracted rather than of its content or meaning” (Burt 41). There are valuable comments here on the complex relationship between seeing, responding and understanding. Janet Wolff, however, writing more than thirty years after Langer, rejects such notions of aesthetic apprehension isolated from “other areas of knowledge and experience” (Burt 42). She argues that a true appreciation of art requires an understanding of meaning and that meaning is culturally specific. Many contemporary critics would agree.

These are important questions for a study of theatre, a form which has been considered to be more “narrative” than dance (in most cases) but which is also a physical text of gesture, mime and movement. Literary approaches to drama have generally ignored the idea that gesture carries meaning in plays except when those gestures fill narratological purpose by expressing known (or knowable) allegories or fill deixic roles in pointing the way along a narrative path. Literary analysis has, for the most part, been eager

to accept the notion of drama as a somehow transcendent, aesthetic experience available only to the minds of sensitive readers.

There are, then, three connected theoretical positions available here: that bodies are constructed; that these constructed bodies themselves help to shape the construction of any physical art form; that reception of these forms depends upon the meaning carried within these constructions rather than upon some direct, mute aesthetic reaction.

The relationships among these principles inform a viewing of dances by Dancing Docs and Dandies, a company consisting of Constance Cooke and Brent Lott, which recently crossed the country on the Fringe circuit. The 1995 show was an evening of six short dances, two with mime, one with words. Dances were created by either Lott or Cooke; some were solos and some were partnered. All the dances contest established stereotypes of the male and female, an expressed aim of the company (and of Cooke's early solo works like *Lifting Belly*.) The programme announces that this work "continues to push at the boundaries that re-enforce sexual stereotypes in contemporary society," an aim implied in the title, evoking as it does a repressed period of gay history in North America when "to be a friend of Dorothy" was to code one's sexual orientation.

The two dancers' bodies announce this intent. Constance Cooke has a short, strong body, powerful legs, a highly expressive face, and almost shaved hair with a spiky fringe at the front (with which she plays in the dances, drawing attention to the lack of hair on the rest of her head). Brent Lott has a tall, sinewy body, very long legs, a delicate, almost pretty face, very long, curly head hair and a very hirsute body (a fact to which he also draws attention by, for example, pulling out the hair in his armpit and looking at it while dancing with Cooke—who also shows arm hair in upstretched poses—and by allowing a very hairy chest to show above the bodice of a ballerina's shift he wears in one work.) These bodies and costumes immediately interrogate assumptions about the male and female, in a rather obvious manner. More important, they work within the theories under consideration to create the dances themselves and to invest them with meanings which arise from context.

"Dick and Jane" is a piece in which the two dancers hold either end of a knotted rope, using it to pull each other up, hold each other against gravity, pull each other around and twist each other up. Taken at face value, this example of "contact improvisation"<sup>1</sup> is simply an exercise in opposing forces. Its gender in-

scriptions, however, make it much more fraught. The dance's title enters the semiotic field because it is printed in the programme and because the *form* of this type of anthology evening invites the audience to consult the programme between works. Having read the programme, then, the audience learns that this dance will call up the potent North American icons, Dick and Jane. And that they will, in this piece, dance together. A complex of expectations arises. Dick is a boy; Jane is a girl: in our primers they lead exemplary lives of absolute gender identification even to respectively owning Spot and Puff. A *danseur* will partner a ballerina. In our experience, he will be graceful but very strong and will disappear behind her thin ephemeral body. This is not, however, the spectacle we observe.

Pulling with equal force on the rope, the two exhibit a basic principle of Physics more perfectly than our culture desires to know it. Opposing forces are equal, physicists tell us, but when they are embodied in a man and woman, we expect his greater mass to overbalance (or voluntarily support) her force. Classical ballet depends on this notion; modernist dance sometimes even exaggerates it, as in Martha Graham's Greek statue-men who stand immovable as women climb on and over them. The problem in Physics is the definition of the system under examination. In "Dick and Jane" the system is the chained set of the two dancers; they operate together as a single unit. As a result, tension on the rope becomes immaterial, but the pull of gravity or other forces on the system itself becomes material. The audience anticipates a competition between the male and female and expects the tug of war to go in his direction. Or it expects the two to tumble over in his direction, as his larger body is attracted to the earth more strongly than her smaller body is attracted to the earth in the opposite direction. Neither occurs. The two dancers give and take, flowing together in a closed universe which escapes social misunderstandings of the Laws of Physics.

Dick and Jane, the dance makes clear, are a closed system, too. They are a system of learning, a protocol of reading, a way of teaching gender. The bodies of Dick and Jane, described and illustrated in the primer stories, allow various actions to occur and prohibit others. A social linkage develops: the possible outcomes of allowed actions create literature of a certain type; the reading of this type of literature teaches what sort of bodies girls and boys should have. The apprehension of such bodies by children, while it may appear an aesthetic experience, is actually a vindication of the form. Cooke

and Lott do not allow such linkage. The form their piece takes defies the logic of its title, resisting the draw of literary convention even as it resists the draw of gender stereotypes.

The same is true of the viewers' expectations regarding ballet. The *danseur* is shown in classical ballet to be strong enough to lift the ballerina. The effect is not, in fact, to stress his strength (his leaps do that); it is to establish the frailty of the ballerina, a wisp who can be lifted even by a slight man in tights. We know that the ballerina must participate athletically in this illusion by leaping into the air and assisting him. (Comic ballets have shown the outcome of her refusal to do so. In *Piano Variations III*, Lindsay Fischer lifts Evelyn Hart straight up as she remains rigid, turns, and puts her straight down in a different spot where she remains still. He is physically able to pick her up, but there is no grace, no beauty, no thrill of the lift. It is hilarious grotesquerie of the white ballet.) In "Dick and Jane," the man neither lifts his ballerina nor parodies the convention. The two, within their closed world, assist each other in maintaining an equilibrium or entangle each other in patterns of balance. To repeat the earlier linkages in theory: the bodies of *danseurs* and ballerinas, rigorously trained and actually deformed, permit various athletic outcomes and prohibit others. The form of the *pas de deux*, once established, can then be taught to other sets of dancers and ballerinas who, as characters in story ballets, must behave in ways similar to the fictive Prince and Princess. Children, taken to the ballet as part of their cultural training, write the dancers onto their own biological bodies (or, as in North America among boys, reject such behaviours, writing their own bodies as oppositional). Again, Cooke and Lott do not allow this imprecation. Their ballet defies the conventions of the genre, resisting traditional choreography just as they personally resist stereotypes. Because the movements do not fit expected dancerly forms, the audience must re-evaluate them, forming an opinion, not mutely "taking in" a spectacle of beauty. In fact, the dance cannot be called beautiful by a traditional definition. A repeated movement in which either body remains rigid but jerks a particular body part, creating a type of movement in non-movement, is particularly compelling to watch, but is in no way beautiful in any accepted sense of the word. Because the bodies resist cultural assumptions and learned balletic styles, the form itself becomes opaque; the audience cannot avoid perceiving political comment and cannot avoid noticing that it has not previously seen this theatrical configuration. The context of the dance is spoken

onto the form just as the context of a play can be spoken onto the form of its theatrical representation. Audiences since Brecht know that disruptions in the transparency of theatrical form not only intensify an aesthetic experience but act, as Anthony Kubiak puts it, "as a kind of . . . antitoxin . . . that disarticulates its mimetic mechanisms beneath its own terrorized gaze" (18). Audiences who choose to attend an evening of dance such as this might be eager to witness such disruptions; the success of Cooke and Lott to dislodge expectation could be measured only in the degree to which an audience anticipating a *pas de deux* from the Romantic repertoire could be lead through these distorted forms to a rethinking of all partnered dances.

In "Robert," Brent Lott dances a haunting solo of mourning. Again, the programme plays a semiotic role. The company has published a note on the creation of the dance, telling its audience that the piece was conceived after reading "Keeping," a poem by Jaik Josephson which describes a man's grief at the "loss" of his partner. Cultural context intervenes again, as the audience assumes the "loss" to be a death due to AIDS. Without this text, as without the words of a play, the audience is free to interpret the movements of the dancer (or actor) quite individually. But the rubric writes a narrative onto Lott's body, labels him as a homosexual widower, calls up the form of the elegy or funeral rite and unites the audience in a shared "reading" of what is now a literary text.

Lott's choreography, to "Tacoma Trailer" by Leonard Cohen, is a series of repeated gestures of grief, arms reaching out to embrace nothing, retreating back to wrap around himself in a protective posture. He crouches, smaller and smaller, losing his natural height, assuming a wounded, fetal position. What is interesting is the lack of traditionally "masculine" movements. Lott does not leap, of course—it would be inappropriate to the theme of the dance—but neither does he stand firm, nor lean into the future, nor even pull images from the past. His grief is absolute, static, of the moment, self-contained. He reaches out to hold but with a striking lack of gender attribution: somehow he is the strong lover reaching to take his mate and the totally submissive partner reaching up to be taken. When he retreats into himself, he is at once the weak, crumbling victim and the peaceful, serene survivor. It is a stunning mix. All the gestures are stereotypes of deprivation and pain, but each resists interpretation. If the audience had no text from which to read his dancing, it would register an amorphous, androgynous grief. The only context left from which to

view Lott would be his biological maleness; the dance would then require a re-evaluation of such a physical text, for Lott cannot be read as male or female in this work. How do men grieve? How might they respond in their private moments of loss? By providing the narrative of AIDS, the company actually allows an escape for the audience, rendering the dance a category of grieving rather than a more universal agon, and assigns a cultural and gender context rather than forcing an active evaluation of a non-linguistic text, an assessment of the aesthetic experience.

In "Jack," Lott appears in a shift, his long hair loose around his shoulders. The signs in this work are particularly powerful. In drag, Lott parodies the stylization of the ballerina. He also speaks mixed nursery rhymes: "Jack be nimble, Jack be quick, eating his curds and whey; He put in his thumb and said, 'I'm scared'." As in "Dick and Jane," the company makes the link between children's literature and learned behaviours. Lott's confusion of the words mirrors his confusion about whether he is Jack or Little Miss Muffet. He discovers a lipstick. At first he applies it carefully, in a mockery of the woman at her toilette. But then he smears the cosmetic, making a clown mask and then a disfiguring mess. Throughout the piece his delicate face, especially with lipstick, appears more and more "feminine," but his very hairy chest and legs deny such inscription. When he lifts his legs in an arabesque, the audience sees black briefs and very strong male legs. Hair is, of course, a potent icon of the male but it is also disallowed in the form of classical ballet. Ramsay Burt cites the objection of nineteenth century audiences to male dancers, quoting Theophile Gautier in 1838: "Nothing is more distasteful than a man who shows his red neck, his big muscular arms, his legs with the calves of a parish beadle, and all his strong massive frame shaken by leaps and pirouettes" (27). There is a connection between such strong bodies and working class men; elitism as well as fear of the body and homophobia appear to be active in Gautier's comments. On the other hand, in 1840, Jules Janin deplores the idea of a middle-class male body being viewed in dance: "That this bewhiskered individual . . . a man whose business is to make and above all unmake laws should come before us in a tunic of sky-blue satin, his head covered with a hat with a waving plume amorously caressing his cheek . . . —this was surely impossible. . ." (quoted in Burt 25). The juxtaposition of "red neck[s]," "muscular arm[s]," "calves" and whiskers with "sky-blue satin" and "waving plumes" is an eloquent statement of rigid cultural coding, hatred of the body, and the inevitable link of the beau-



tiful or luxurious with corrupting, feminine sexuality ("amorously caressing his cheek"). In the ballet, the *danseur* may expose his legs and buttocks (indeed, this is one of the spectacles which defines the ballet's particular adaptation of the "gaze") but these legs are clothed in white tights which hide their considerable musculature and hair. Lott's legs are very much on display in "Jack." The muscles contort as he assumes classical poses of the ballerina, his briefs and dance belt are seen, he is covered with sweat which mats in his hair; any illusion of the ideal Prince is deconstructed even as his ballerina is spoofed. Jack, it seems, is male but not ideal, hirsute but wearing a shift; playing with his mother's lipstick but aware he is a buffoon to do so. Judith Butler's comments on the masquerade and the necessary repetition of gender inscriptions come to mind; it seems Lott has not previously repeated this action and, therefore, while it intrigues him, it still seems false to him. He conveys this falseness to the audience. In parallel to, but reversal of Lacan's assertion that even "virile display itself" when it depends upon masquerade "appears as something feminine," Lott's male body appears "as something masculine" showing through a femininized performance. It is in this reversal that the dance becomes an important statement and, as well, escapes censure as only another example of a white male gay body refusing at the last moment to take on fully those representations generally left to female bodies and non-white bodies to carry. Lott is not "unable and unwilling 'to strip [himself] of the privileges of white heterospectacle' . . . [so he can] return to *his* closet . . . and pass invisibly . . . hidden in a masquerade which can perform the stability of a subjectivity which seems congruent to his normatively gendered white body" (Currid 191).<sup>2</sup> His character is terrified of what is happening (and might want to rush back into a closet), but Lott is delighted with the whole performance, laughing at himself and the audience while managing to capture Jack's "scared" attitude. It is not only the burlesque of form which makes the dance interesting; it is the self-conscious reversal of what Butler calls "inner" and "outer" (136) which extends the comment far beyond the political comment inherent in travesty. Butler notes that the "integrity" of the subject is controlled by "gender border control" (136); Lott displays no such control and there is, as a result, no "integrity" to his performed gender.

Cooke makes a similar statement in "Brock-Lee," but this dance with words further imposes text and props onto movement and is less subtle. Cooke mimes a woman beset with fear of her

bathroom scales and preoccupied with body images from fashion magazines. She creates stepping stones of approved images by throwing magazines down in front of her as she moves along a tight, controlled path; she puts on and takes off red, spike-heeled shoes and black work boots, ending up wearing one of each. At the end of the dance, she finds a chocolate bar in her jacket pocket and, triumphant and rebellious, she gulps it down in huge bites, while standing on the scale. As she eats, her mouth and then face become smeared with chocolate, an image reminiscent of Lott's lipstick jester. It is a comment on diet regimes for women, of course, but it is also a repudiation of the image of the danseuse made more powerful by Cooke's earlier capitulation to such policing images.

In this dance, the audience is not allowed to form impressions beyond the sociological statement. Specific physical images, like Cooke's strong legs in opposing shoes, stamping on a shiny red case (if not a wheelbarrow), invite complex analysis, but the narrativity of her gestures dissuades such speculation. Neither is the form as distorted in this dance as it is in other pieces, so attention is drawn to the thematics rather than to the structure. In this dance the form remains transparent. The narrative overrides aesthetics also, so the audience is not asked either to intuit beauty (as in Langer's theory), nor to re-examine its appreciation (as in Woolf's).

This response seems germane to an analysis of plays, where semantic text often overwhelms physical text and where literary analysis threatens to ignore mimic analysis. Is it not necessary in examining plays to prevent established literary forms from obscuring the active construction of the drama by the bodies on stage? To fall under the spell of literary form hidden within a narrative is to allow the construction of that form to appear natural rather than contextual and, by extension, to allow the comments made by the actors' bodies (or other themes presented in the play) to appear transcendent.

When Lott rejoins Cooke on stage, their bodies have altered totally from the bodies they presented at the outset. The *danseur* and ballerina are now covered in perspiration, cross-dressed and smeared with lipstick and chocolate. They match each other as caricatures but they also present new body types. The audience has watched the construction of these two bodies over the space of an hour, which reminds it that all bodies are constructed, that bodies constructed on stage are products of artful manipulation of audience reception, that the construction of actors' bodies usually obscures the form in which they move, that such construction is generally

invisible but can be made manifest, that our appreciation of those bodies (especially in a play with high production values or a shimmering white ballet) seems radiant and emotional, but is also the product of aesthetic construction specific to time and place. By stripping themselves of pretense, Constance Cooke and Brent Lott reveal a basic truth of performance art that all critics of drama might well bear in mind.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This form of dance, using bodies which appear not to be performing any physical skill (while, of course, doing so), developed in the 1970s. In *Sharing the Dance*, Cynthia Novack argues that the form depends upon non-hierarchical relationships which refuse to display traditional valuations either of strength or purpose.

<sup>2</sup> Brian Currid quotes Lauren Berlant, and Elizabeth Freeman. "Queer Nationality," *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer: Queer Politics and Social Theory*. Ed. Michael Warner. Minneapolis: U of Minneapolis P, 1993: 218.

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