



An act of embodiment

Judith Williamson asks how dance communicates

Judith Williamson

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When a scene from Giselle appeared on TV during their video rewind, my small nephews were fascinated and curious - "Why is no one speaking?" I explained: "In ballet, people show how they feel by the way they dance." "So what are they feeling?" On the screen was a graceful and poignant pas de deux and I struggled for words. "Well, he's drawn to her; look at the way he moves towards her and leaps with her, and she seems sad, she lets him hold her and her movements flow with his, but she has to pull away ..." It felt clumsy, as if I hadn't answered the question.

In the end, I said, "Bodies can show feelings in a way that's different from words telling about them." By this time, the video had rewound and I was left pondering the inadequacy of language to paraphrase the meanings of movement. Dance is not, fundamentally, a form of representation - where something stands for something else - but an act of embodiment. At the level of meaning, dance doesn't tell, it does. Two people on stage move towards one another and then away: you could say this is "about" two people moving closer and then apart, but that's not quite right - it is it, palpably, visibly. Nor is it two actors pretending to experience the emotions of closeness and separation: the dancers are, quite literally, moving - not pretending to be moved.

A vivid example of this in contemporary ballet is Wayne McGregor's *2 Human*, created last year for the English National Ballet to music by JS Bach. In this 12-minute piece, a man and a woman dance both together and apart, but always in relation to one another, through changing movements of harmony, conflict, ease, tension, entanglement, separation, fragility, strength, support, abandonment, tenacity, intimacy ... a relationship presented not metaphorically but concretely, in the dance itself. The one stage prop of a bed in the background is entirely unnecessary - this is not a play (the dancers don't have to dissemble) but a playing out, in bodily form, of human dynamics. The ins and outs of the couple are not make-believe, but physically real.

An even more striking example of physical embodiment is Russell Maliphant's *Broken Fall*, set to music by Barry Adamson and performed recently by Sylvie Guillem, Michael Nunn and William Trevitt of the Royal Ballet. The three dancers use one another's bodies to create balance and imbalance as the male dancers repeatedly raise and drop the woman, whose fall, often from a breathtaking height or improbable angle, is broken just in time in ways that place her safety entirely in the hands of her comrades. This is not a work "about" risk and trust - rather, it cannot be performed without their real presence. Nothing is being represented here: the meaning of the work is inherent in the action.

Works such as these engage the very essence of dance - the meanings they invoke are inseparable from pure movement. One could argue that the traditional ballet is more representational, with its tales of peasants and swans and dancing toys, its atmospheric sets and striking costumes. But although classical ballet usually tells a story, whose dynamics are expressed in the physical "language" of choreography, ultimately the meanings are brought to life neither by story nor steps, but by the body of the dancer. And the dancer's body is most expressive not when it is standing for something else (a character, an emotion) but when it is most fully itself. Representation, a "filling in" for something absent, is the antithesis of dance - where the body must be full, almost to bursting, of its own presence in order to communicate at all.

The film-maker Robert Bresson was acutely aware of what he saw as the "disembodiment" of acting: "The actor projects himself before him in the form of the character he wants to seem; lends him his own body, face, voice; makes him sit down, stand up, walk; penetrates him with sentiments he himself does not have." In his own films he used what he called "models"; people who would not act but just "be" in the film in the right place and with the right gestures, not

mimicking somebody else. Bresson's notes say, "Model. Soul, body, both inimitable". Because he believed that our souls are expressed in our bodies, he saw acting as a suppression of the body's true meaning - its embodiment of the soul that is ours alone.

Unlike the actor's, the dancer's body inevitably resists being given away. The more fully a dancer throws themselves into dancing a part, the more they come across physically as completely themselves. It is a paradox, not just of dance, but of our own existence, that often when physical being is at full tilt, the human essence seems most visible. When a dancer is giving it all they've got, what we see is no illusion, even if they are performing a "role": the animating spirit cannot be borrowed or faked, it is the dancer's own.

This is why dance at its most purely physical can give us the sense of seeing the soul in action; and this does not merely apply to wildly energetic or virtuoso dance - it is about the body being inhabited completely, not spectacularly. In many Eastern practices, fully inhabiting the body is seen as a spiritual state; one that often takes physical work (yoga, tai chi) to achieve. Professional dancing requires extremely hard training and is far from spontaneous; nevertheless, when someone dances with the whole of their being, you can see something essential of them that is free and uncontrived. Along with singing (the human voice is perhaps the only parallel), dancing reveals something of ourselves that is unique and cannot be defined.

It is this element that is untranslatable, because it is not a message - it is about being. It is here that we all begin, before language arrives: here that the body is about making rather than meaning. You cannot tell a baby that everything is all right (and expect to be understood) - but you can pick him up and hold him in a way that doesn't tell, but makes everything all right.

It is perhaps only with infants and with lovers that we take for granted the ability of our bodies not so much to "speak" as to affect another person directly, at a level where the physical and emotional are inseparable. Movement and touch are material, things that our bodies can do: and yet we talk of being moved and touched as internal states, it is bodily dynamics that best describe our feelings. This turns on its head my attempt to translate a pas de deux into non-physical language: "He leaps towards her and lifts her up," is much more vivid, emotionally, than "he loves her". Movement and touch aren't a "language" that emotions can be translated into, they are our earliest, primary way of communicating (along with the texture of the voice) - which is why dance can reach us in such a fundamental place.

George Balanchine's *Prodigal Son* both tells a story of that place and reaches us in it. This 40-minute ballet, scored by Prokofiev, ran earlier this year in a Balanchine programme at the Royal Ballet, with Carlos Acosta as the son. Bursting with physical power and virtuoso energy, leaping, turning, almost flying, he whirls through the first act so that the space seems barely able to hold him - he must physically break the bounds (indicated by a picket fence) and leave. The dance says it all: his spirit and strength seem limitless. There follows a second act in which corrupt company, and a seduction, lead to his downfall - his wicked companions also have a whirling, almost whirring, insect-like energy but though physically striking it is menacing and relentless, and the son is robbed and stripped, tied up and broken.

The final act is extraordinary for a ballet in that it contains no "dancing" at all. The young man drags himself horizontally across the floor of the stage, in painfully slow and tortuous movements, until he finally arrives back at the fence. Inside stands his father, a small, cloaked figure, arms outstretched; the son crawls forward inch by inch until he reaches him. Then the father simply picks him up from the ground, so that he is completely held and contained,

enveloped in the cloak. It is a heartstopping moment - not just because of what it "means" but because it is almost impossible to believe, physically, that the relatively small man is able to carry the weight of that strong, glorious dancer whose physique we saw fully at the beginning. And he goes on holding him, not for a few moments, but continuously, as the ballet ends.

The sheer amazement that he has the strength to do this makes our emotions not just those of people being told a story, with a moving end - it is the literal movement of the end which takes our breath away, we are responding to a real act. This action doesn't "represent" love, acceptance, forgiveness; it embodies them in a way we can understand without any words at all. We do not need to translate dance: it speaks in our own very first, and most intimate way.

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