

# **FIRST STEPS**

**First Physical Theatre Company**

**Research Paper**

**by**

**Jeannette Ginslov**

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# Sometimes you're on and sometimes you're not. So I guess this time I was on.

Feminism, the Body, postmodernism, choreography and dance  
of the First Physical Theatre Company

*Jeannette Ginslov*

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Dancers are not neutral surfaces awaiting masterly inscriptions,  
They exist as highly trained and articulate experts of movement who  
color the choreographic process with their own subjectivities.

[Brown 1983 208-209]

This paper focuses on how the author's creative vision is invested in the performer's instrument of expression, the dancer's personality, personal history and training, and the dancing body's social, historical and, political milieu. It examines how these constitute the medium of expression for the creator's vision.

The aim of this paper then, is to uncover a form of choreography that reveals a feminist mode of production. This process of artistic production dismantles the hierarchical relationship between the choreographer and the dancer and serves to "consider the inventiveness of the dancer as interpreter and articulator of the text". [ibid.]. Shifts in the methods of analysis are therefore necessary. It is not only the final product that is examined. New approaches to articulating history, dance history in a postmodern feminist format are attended to and the discursive formation of cultural artifacts is highlighted. These methods are more likely to uncover the hidden stories, the small histories, smaller narratives and discourses that lie dormant in a dance work. Definitions of dance and production are then reclassified. Creation becomes production and reception becomes consumption.

The investigator attends therefore to the construction of the dancing body, its participation in the discourses of classes, rehearsals and performances, "thinking

through the body and its various constructions,” throughout the choreographic process. [ibid.]. This method allows for the understanding of the process of history and realigns the body and the meanings of the dancing body according to the “conditions of the production and the varying discourses, social, political and economic, within which it operates.” [ibid.] This form of dance analysis, according to dance theorist Susan Foster, encourages the examination of the “body’s role in the production of narrative, and the construction of collectivity, in the articulation of the unconscious, and the generation of post-coloniality, and the expression of gender and expression.” [Foster 1996 xv]. What is defined or contoured are the “new relations between history and memory, the aesthetic and political, the social and the individual.” [ibid.].

This paper will highlight the feminist choreographic processes that were evident in the production of *Icons*, choreographed by Gary Gordon, Artistic Director of the ***First Physical Theatre Company (FPTC)***. The methodology utilized to uncover this process was reliant on in-depth interviews of the performers or collaborators involved in the production of “Icons”. This researcher also attended dance classes, rehearsals and performances of the performers and documented the contribution of the performers involved in the choreographic process, in order to note their impact on the production of meaning in the work. As a result, a deeper understanding of the discourses inherent in physical theatre is revealed. Dance historian, June Layson, states that that such methods of documentation are relevant as a dance historian normally bases her/his work on fragments of information. It is rare that dance history is “itself (-) extant.” [Brown 1983 203].

The areas of investigation follow the order of the questions in the interviews.

- dance training and background of the interviewees.
- subjectivity – the unstable self.
- Gordon’s choreographic process.
- body politics – issues of gender and the homosexual gaze

## **Dance training and background of interviewees**

Many contemporary dance forms and classical ballet produce a homogenizing medium, idealizing extended bodily lines and clear shapes. Gordon's physical theatre works against these concerns and strives for an aesthetic that values difference and variety. The information from the interviewees reveals how the performers' different physical training backgrounds feed this agenda and ethos of Gordon's physical theatre.

The following performers were interviewed: Gladys Agulhas, Andrew Cameron, Juanita Finestone and Werner Marx. Andrew Buckland was also interviewed for his collaboration on the text for "Golgotha" and "Change". The "Icons" programme consisted of three physical theatre dance works, "Lilith", "Change" and "Golgotha". The interviewees' responses are descriptive of all three works and reflect the processes that were adopted in the production of these works.

Each performer was asked to describe her/his dance background and training and asked how this affected their choices of movement vocabulary during improvisation sessions. The range of training was very diverse.

Agulhas's training included years of ballet, jazz, Graham and Horton techniques at the **Johannesburg Dance Foundation (JDF)**. She later danced professionally with **Pact Dance Company (PDC)** and the **Johannesburg Dance Theatre (JDT)**. Cameron, on the other hand, trained exclusively with Gordon at the Rhodes University Drama Department and has only performed with **FPTC**. I mainly used their responses as an indication of how their knowledge of dance techniques informed their movement choices. These two performer's training is vastly different and so their responses are indicators of the impact of Gordon's choreographic process on them as performers with different dance backgrounds.

Agulhas, whilst working with **PDC**, had to learn "four ballets in a month", usually from video archives. The choreographers who worked with the company, "always (gave) you the style, what they (wanted), and you just had to take it in all the

time. You never (asked) questions and you never (said) anything.” Working on improvisations with Gordon she felt that “you are given something but you are also given a chance to put something of yourself in. He taps into another sense of you...When we did it the first time I really tried honestly not to think about my technique. That’s the last thing you want to hammer, because you hide behind your technique.” She felt exposed working in this manner because she had to give something from her personal self. At first she did not know how to react or what to do.

Cameron, on the other hand, has only experienced Gordon’s choreographic processes. He knows that “even if you’re given some kind of direction to go into, you go into it with your own filters, with your own experience”. He finds it difficult to learn other choreographer’s movement because his body “knows certain patterns that it is comfortable being in.” However he does feel that “you tend to come up with Gordon kind of movements when you make it up. You’re not really coming from yourself.” Cameron later added that, “you will end up doing what you choose to do and if you’re not going to take responsibility for that you won’t come up with interesting stuff and neither will he...In “Golgotha” every person had a different intention.” He also battled against a sense of self-consciousness as “you have to come from somewhere real “ from within yourself and that was the hardest part.

Finestone acknowledged that Gordon’s technique classes taught at the beginning of the choreographic process were a means of creating a Gordon signature and uniformity for the working group, as the performers came from quite different dance backgrounds. It was during the training that the Gordon influence occurred. Generally, it is here that he teaches his vocabulary. However the different body types that he chooses to work with, ensure that the “look” of the performers are never absolutely uniform.

### **Subjectivity – the unstable self**

The feminist project for dance history and choreography must not only take into consideration the performer's medium of expression, the body, but also the personality and subjective stance of the performer. This is essential to the feminist and postmodernist project, as the silenced and marginal areas of experience are opened up and exposed. Dance historian Helen Thomas, maintains that feminists and postmodernists therefore forego "the traditional grand or meta-narratives (as they are) authoritarian (and) because they offer a single unitary view of the world." [Thomas 1996 68] The latter stifles the pluralism, differences, ironies and intertextualities that are evident in experience.

Feminists and postmodernists embrace the view that the individual is "situated in and articulated through a complex web of social relations, discourses, and practices." [ibid.]. Identities are therefore fractured and fragmentary. The idea of a fixed subjectivity is rejected, as unconscious desires and drives continuously "exert pressure on (-) conscious thoughts and actions, as do other material and ideological factors of which we are unaware." [ibid.] Therefore the idea of a unified, stable subject becomes infeasible. The conscious acknowledgement of the many converging unconscious processes that impinge upon our conscious actions and thoughts is impossible.

The feminist strategy would then be one that foregoes the master-narrative and total ownership of the author in favor of the experiential knowledge of the performer that shapes the work and claims authorship. This challenges the workings of modernist hegemonies that revere the master choreographer and dance historian.

During the interviews it became clear that Gordon was reliant on the creativity and personalities of his performers. In order for his processes of production to work, he required performers that had life skills and that had experience in creativity. According to Finestone, a strange combination of patience and passion was required from the performers. One needed to be assertive as well as open,

“allowing things to happen”, so that, as Agulhas put it, “everybody in the whole company stimulated each other.” Like Agulhas, Cameron felt that the energy of the people in the group, the moods of the people affected the group. “One is very influenced by what people are doing around you,” he said. The sense of openness and co-operation that existed amongst the performers was evident during classes and rehearsals. These are important characteristic traits in the process of contact improvisation. Finestone maintained that one needed a sense of “bigness” to work with the group and that Gordon chose people that he believed would accommodate each other’s personal characteristics.

Cameron admitted that he is quite open, shy, yet secretive. He admitted that he could also be rude, selfish and difficult for the sake of being difficult. This is what made him revert to old ways of moving in the chorus of “Golgotha”. He wanted to do things the way he liked doing them. This was evident in the “Change” duets. Marx and Agulhas also complained of his stubbornness in the chorus of “Golgotha” where Cameron would not follow the group’s timing. Cameron explained that this frame of mind was due to the fact that he “was going through lots of personal things” at the time. “Gordon,” he explained, “leaves you lots of space...because you bring with you all your history and all your baggage as well. You can’t leave that outside.” Finestone maintained that the separation of the personal and the professional is impossible. She added that, “they exist right in each other because the sources (for production) are from the body, the personal, your own body. There are no formulas...it’s individual, it comes from your body, so you’re bringing all that stuff into it.”

Cameron put it quite succinctly. “You are subject of the dance. You have lots of freedom as a performer...you are not a machine, you are thinking on your feet. I think that’s the hardest part – making up a story for yourself, because if that isn’t strong enough the work suffers. In that kind of work, if you’re not going to do all that technical aesthetic dance sort of thing, you must feed it with something else and if that’s not there then it’s like people sort of groping about.”

### **Gordon's choreographic process**

Gordon's choreographic process utilized in the production of "Icons" embodies the aims of physical theatre and demonstrates a postmodern ethos. Finestone in her paper, The Muse and The Archeologist; Re-visiting the creative sites of the Unspeakable Story, identifies four concepts that are central to physical theatre.

These are:

- the idea of a holistic theatre experience
- the notion of artistic collaboration
- research and utilization of source material
- the mobilisation of the body

Physical theatre uses the full range of theatrical elements of performance: the visual, the aural, the sensual, motion and emotion. These are teased out of the juxtaposition and collaboration of different artistic mediums such as, text, dance, design, props and music. The traditional and conventional boundaries found in Western Theatre are broken down with this approach. Each of the theatrical elements are integrated yet independent and reliant on the collaborative artistic process, so that the works are never only the view of the director/choreographer. All the artists involved in the project contribute to the production. Even the performers own idiosyncratic ways of moving and their own creativity is explored in extensive improvisation and experimentation sessions. Stereotypical images of the dancing body and gender are subverted with the use of a range of body types and alternative partnering techniques. Audiences are therefore called upon to redefine their notions of theatre, dance, gender and sexuality.

The processes and production of physical theatre reflect a postmodern stance. Within such a context the truth of final fixed meaning is brought into question and is opened out to difference. The play of multiple signifiers only generates meaning in relation to other signifiers. Binary fact is replaced by multiple fictions. Hence there is no claim to final meaning. The Aristotelian unity of time, place and character are severed with the use of circular narrative strategies. Meaning and

interpretation are left open-ended. Thus the master knowledge legacy of western dance forms is challenged.

What follows are the views of the interviewees that support the above claims of physical theatre. This researcher's views are also included. They are grounded in the researcher's participation of classes, rehearsals and performances.

According to Finestone, Gordon conceives the work. He has a clear concept of the work that he brings to the rehearsal room. The collaborative process or the input from the performers, begins when he sets a number of movement tasks for the performers to work on. In this manner the master/slave paradigm, so apparent in modernist dance processes is dismantled. Finestone said that "he does sometimes teach vocabulary, but even then he would teach you something and then say, 'go and change it or work out five variations on this particular movement theme.'"

Gordon and the performers also create the vocabulary from a number of other sources. The sources are sometimes visual, paintings for example or aural, written texts and movements that create sound. The source is always from a movement, never an intellectual or emotional source. The different theatrical elements such as text, design, lighting, costume connect with the dance in a collaborative manner. Each element adds a layer of meaning to the work.

Finestone stated however that "when it actually comes to making new works, the creative imagination and daring and physicality of the performers is really what counts – how bodies connect, how bodies work out a vocabulary...Gordon never teaches steps there." This was evident when the performers worked in pairs with contact improvisation. Contact improvisation relies on total commitment to individual body weight, morphology, the spirit of egalitarianism, co-operation and trust.

Cameron maintained that eventually “there are free floating bits of movement that are passed on - that doesn’t belong to anybody,” One does not question whose movement belongs to whom. One never claims ownership of the movement as Gordon makes subtle changes to the movement choices of the performers by giving and sharing movement sequences that are found during the improvisational period. Even during performance the movements alter slightly as the transitions become clearer and Gordon allows the performer to work these out. Cameron added that, “Gordon is not entirely set about where he’s going. It’s a very transient thing...there’s no linearity to it...it all goes round in circles. There is not a narrative. You have to inform each moment.”

All the interviewees, including Buckland maintained that Gordon has the final say about the choices of movement, text and design. Here his signature is strong. In his capacity as director he is the “outside eye “ and shapes the work according to his conceptual framework.

Gordon’s conceptual framework is so strong that, according to Marx, “you tap into it and realize the nuances that he requires...he’s not going to buy it if he doesn’t want it. He will take what you give him if the material is true to the task. (Gordon) is very open to suggestions and questions about movement choices. He is also not afraid to do what you think. He will tell you if something is not right.”

Cameron experienced a time when during the production of “Golgotha” he had a problem with a certain movement that he felt was “just showing off”. He asked Gordon if he could make up something new. Gordon’s response was immediate: “Yes fine, what do you want to do?” Cameron however also experienced a problem with this process. Sometimes he became “schoep” or mean with his movement ideas. He felt that he did not want to give all his movement ideas away.

Finestone maintained that this is where the notion of collaboration becomes tricky: “What is collaboration? Who claims final responsibility? In this case the conception belongs to the choreographer (however) in a way we are all doing the choreography all the time.” She maintained though that there is a need for a director with a “big vision” to “draw it all together.” Someone has to “birth the project, midwife it, nurse it and then produce the baby.”

### **Body politics – issues of gender and the homosexual gaze**

Foster claims that the body is a field of signifying systems. In dance the body is not only seen as a vehicle for expression. The moving body is inscribed through cultural practices and always points “towards other fields of meaning,” [Foster 1996 xi]. Bodies “illuminate the corporeal play that is vital to cultural production and to theoretical formulations of cultural process.”[ibid.] Carol Brown, a feminist dance historian, furthers this argument and claims that the body’s representations, “carry with them set of values and attributes which are embedded in particular ideologies and are, therefore, capable of creating, endorsing or subverting ideas about gender.”[Brown 1983 204]. Thus the marginalised experiences that have been previously silenced or left out are privileged and given a voice.

Gordon’s physical theatre addresses the above concerns and the works have become politically relevant. Conventional and stereotypical representations of the body are challenged and the binaries inherent in such representations are inverted and subverted.

According to Cameron “gender stereotyping in Gordon’s work is atypical and the homosexual gaze is strong.” In all of the work, males play an important role. The works focus on and highlight the male body, the way it moves, its sexuality and femininity. This is done in a subtle manner. The sensuality of the male body is explored and there is a general movement towards feminine energy. Cameron observed in *Icons* that “the women deliver the people...towards feminine energy.”

Marx stated that physical theatre strives to express the feelings that the body needs to express, through the body whether it's male or female. Sometimes the male performers do something "unboy like, camp or funny or something that males wouldn't normally do as dancers." The audience is surprised and given an experience rather than a vision. For the performers it is experiential rather than technical. This is unlike the mainstream dance forms found in South Africa that revere the virility, attack and strength of the male dancing body. In such forms the aesthetic and themes highlight masculine principles such as speed, definition, line, form, virtuosity and control.

Male and female identities in fact fuse in Gordon's work. Finestone is very masculine and Cameron, who finds himself to be very feminine, likes dancing with her. This also surprises audiences. Added to this subversion is the use of gravity, floorwork, contact work and release that create another language, making the experience for the dancer and viewer more real. The sensation is more visceral and the body moves from that impulse, from the torso, from the centre of gravity and outward to the peripheries.

Cameron finds that the use of curves and undulating movements initiated in the hips and spine disturbs mainstream audiences. They are not accustomed to white males moving in such a manner. Their norms are being questioned especially when two males are dancing together sensually. Gordon therefore makes a demand on the audience's frame of reference. His political stance on sexuality is a challenge to South African audiences whose views on homosexuality are still quite retrogressive.

Gender stereotyping is subverted according to Marx by changes in partnering. Men and women share an equal status in partnering. It is not always that the woman is lifted as in the more traditional and classical forms of dance. Here women lift other women and even men. Agulhas maintains that this breaks the stereotypical view of the dominant male, "steering the girl". Her experience has

been one where “the man always manipulates the girl, picks up or throws the girl...the male always complaining about (her) weight.” Working for **FPTC** she felt challenged. After partnering for the first time with Finestone she felt empowered, not dominated. Later on she partnered Cameron “and the same thing happened – no difference at all.” She felt as though they were on the same level. There is a “sense of not dominating somebody, you’re out there standing straight on your own two feet and nobody’s controlling you, and you are in charge of what you’re doing. You do what you want to do...There’s nobody sitting on top of your head and telling you to do this or that.”

Finestone observed that Gordon’s presentations of gender stereotypes are provocative. Despite the fact that the vocabulary is athletic the men are often depicted as gentle and sensual. The women are very strong. She maintains that he carefully chooses the individuals he wishes to work with.“ Gary would never force a particular look. It depends on what you can do. Gary will go with each individual quality that the male or female offers and work with what your strengths are.” The issues of class, race and sex are politicized in this manner.

In physical theatre therefore, the body becomes a political minefield. The body is a site of many cultural references. At this site the performer is able to express her/his identity in all its registers. Finestone maintains that because we come from a country where bodies have been incredibly repressed, through violence and fear, the personal stories that these bodies express in physical theatre, are powerfully political. In a country like ours where people come from such different backgrounds and different modes of experience this form of theatre has so much potential to take theatre to a really vital place.

## Conclusion

This paper then, confirms Cynthia Novack's claim that, "(d)ance studies can illuminate knowledge created through bodies, movement, artistic ideas, and choreographic interactions. (They) can participate in dialogues about theory and practice and about the most personal articulations of political forces and social power." [Novack 1995 182] Furthermore if artistic and bodily endeavours are subjected to a historicization and contextualization within a postmodern and feminist framework, they are able to take into account the role of the dancer and performer in the production of the cultural artifact.

Within this framework, the body is problematized and is understood as a constructed category within the process of production. The feminist problematization of gender interrogates the relationship between biological and cultural bodily constructions. These other discourses become apparent when the "postmodern performances of bodies, the cross-discipline fascination of the body as discourse," are recognised. [Foster xiii 1996]

Dance history must not only take into account the construction of dance but its changes through time. Experiential knowledge rendered by the performer/dancer is essential for this perspective to be realized. This reveals a feminist stance of dance history. This is one that understands history "as a process, one which is constantly realigning the meanings of the dancing body according to the conditions of the production and the varying discourses, social, political and economic, within which it operates." [Brown 1983 211] The history of dance cannot be a documentation of the body in general, as history cannot be about anything in general. A rich source of investigation or any study of embodiment is provided by the dancing body in a specific time. Dance studies must take into consideration the body's "constructions, its changes through time, its presents." [Foster 1996 xiii] At this site the interplay of cultural endeavour, signification in time and history, are apparent to the audience, performer and scholar. Hayden White, dance theorist, claims that we cannot write a history of the body in general

or even of a species of a body. This is so because “species do not have histories except in so far as they undergo transformation through the variegation of their individual members. Every history is a story of the ways in which the individual violates the specificity of species.” [White 1995 233]

So this paper has attempted to uncover the individual histories of each or some of the performers/dancers in “Icons”. The “other” discourses, normally trapped within the process of production and in docile bodies have been uncovered. The theatrical mode of this physical theatre extends this further by problematizing relevant and contemporary issues. *FPTC*, the production and consumption of it, therefore requires a viewer with an open mind set, as it shatters pre-conceptions about dance and the body and this generates controversy. The methods of capturing and re-writing this dance history are powerful tools for uncovering *FPTC*'s postmodern and feminist stance.

This dance history therefore refocuses the individual body as the primary site of power. It draws attention to the power of the dancer as an articulate thinking being, rewriting dance at every at every turn, step, catch and fall. Above all, it is able to present and expose the moving body's idiosyncratic potential, its identity, its power, self-knowledge and expression. This methodology challenges other dance practitioners who create dance with docile bodies. It is only from this point that South African dance can grow into a powerful form reflective of empowered and liberated individuals.

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