choreography. In addition to these papers there was a fourth presentation by noted dance studies editor Barbara Palfy on the precepts and mechanisms of editing and their value to emerging writers.

Ultimately, we sought to raise questions about students' relationship to critical writing about dance—indeed, to consider contemporary approaches to dance criticism. Our audience for the panel included two noted dance critics, Deborah Jowitt and Marcia Siegel, who pointed to the integrity needed for writing about dance and spoke to the value of dance writing as an essential discipline. Our long-term goal is to continue this conversation with publication here, which we hope will prompt reader responses about new initiatives for teaching dance writing and, more broadly, the relationship of dance and writing in and out of the academy. We would like to open up a world in which dancers and dance students could be encouraged to articulate their experience of dance and in so doing become exhilarated.

"But How Do I Write about Dance?": Thoughts on Teaching Criticism

Julie Malnig

For the past several years I have taught an advanced writing seminar at New York University's Gallatin School called Writing About Performance. While dance is not the only focus—we write about various forms of live art—it is indeed a central component. The students are from a range of backgrounds; many are dancers, but not all. Most have some interest in the arts; some are journalism students, others anthropology and art history students. The mix is refreshing, if sometimes challenging, as many of them are unschooled in various forms of contemporary performance.

I have discovered a curious phenomenon in these seminars. At the beginning of the course, as we review the syllabus and I discuss the assignments, there is invariably one student, if not more, who either boldly raises her hand, or quietly approaches me after class, to say that she is terrified of writing about dance.[1] One student (who turned out to be a fairly strong writer), went so far as to plead with me—"I'll write about virtually anything, but please don't ask me to write about dance!" Others tell me that they are willing to try writing about dance but declare they know nothing about it—or don't understand it (more on that later). Then there are the practicing dance students who are usually curious, if a little wary, at the prospect of translating their kinesthetic understanding of dance into prose. But they labor under a slightly different constraint in that the forms of dance they feel most comfortable writing about, and which they feel they "know," are those they have studied—usually ballet or some type of modern dance—and *not* postmodern dance (more on that later).

My syllabus explains that the course aims to help writers train their "eyes" to enable them to become more critical viewers of performance and then translate that "looking" into descriptive and analytical prose. Easier said than done, for sure. As it turns out, by the end of the semester many a student has accomplished just this,

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and it's thrilling to see a student open her eyes to dance and performance in a way that she hadn't before, to discover the joy of inhabiting language, to see that words are visceral and that, as writer Jeanette Winterson notes, "she can eat them, wear them, and enter them like tunnels" (1995, 172–73). But what I would like to ponder with you are some of the reasons why students so often, even in a self-selected class, resist this type of writing, and what some of the possible avenues might be to alter their preconceptions, re-calibrate their expectations, and literally get students to open their eyes to the phenomenological experience of the dance itself: not only to report on their "experience" or their "feelings" but to address—with their senses fully turned on—what they saw.

One of the reasons, I believe, for students' resistance to many of the tasks I ask of them (and this includes writing a straight-up "performance description," with absolutely no evaluation) is their preconception, whether they are fully conscious of it or not, that criticism is a form of writing that tears down rather than opens up; judges rather than analyzes; exhibits superiority over the subject rather than asks questions. Certainly the problem is not limited to the classroom; connoisseurship critics—or, what dance critic Ann Daly has called "canon criticism" (2002a, xxxiii)—exists in varying degrees of extremes all around us, in the daily newspapers and popular press. At its heart, this kind of criticism, as Daly notes, "becomes the enforcement of a set of standards regarded as universal and eternal, and, hence, objective" (xxxiii). I don't want to demean this type of criticism altogether—we have had many of our own eloquent connoisseur critics, such as Edwin Denby and Arlene Croce; Denby, for instance, in his exacting and elegant prose, helped pioneer new audiences for modern dance. But the kind of criticism I am referring to, and to which students seem to respond, is a "thumbs up, thumbs down," consumer variety of connoisseur criticism that enables students to hide behind a veneer of self-importance that masks their inability to have really penetrated the performance at all.

This leads me to the second problem of students not trusting their ability to apprehend the work *for what it is.* On the one hand, when students engage in judgmental criticism, it is often because they are as yet unequipped to respond to the work by placing it in its aesthetic, historical, or cultural context; this is knowledge they have yet to acquire. But also, I believe, they often simply confuse *opinion* with *experience.* From the students' perspective, to write from one's experience often means stating whether a thing was good or bad rather than, in the Susan Sontag-ian sense, of attempting to explain what the work did, how it worked on them, and what elements provoked specific reactions. As dance critic Deborah Jowitt (2001) has explained so convincingly in "Beyond Description: Writing Beneath the Surface," descriptive writing, when done well, does more than look at surface details; it may contain within it an analysis and interpretation of how the dance does what it does. Granted, this type of "thick descriptive" writing is a discipline to be learned; it takes practice. And partly for that reason many young writers want to get through the description quickly, before the easier and what seems like the sexier (and fun) part of delivering an opinion.

A third issue, shared by dancers and nondancers alike, is the difficulty of writing specifically about postmodern dance. For many student writers, postmodern dance

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seems to connote some "secret language" for which they feel they lack a code. My sense is that any dance that doesn't convey an overt "expressiveness" of character or a narrative pull poses problems for the young writer. If the work contains the semblance of experience that mimics real life, then the writer feels on surer ground because she can attach "meaning" to it. This is Sontag's argument in her seminal essay "Against Interpretation" (1979), of course, that the urge to connect the artwork solely to its "content" is in part an attempt to make it manageable, containable, and therefore explainable. While on the one hand it seems that students might find variations of postmodern dance to be *more* accessible than other forms of dance—because of its democratic impulse, its matter-of-factness, and its pedestrian movements (movement, of course, that dance theorist Susan Foster reminds us was "reframed" for performance and "newly ordered" [1986, 169])—it nonetheless usually baffles young writers. Although this is a much larger discussion, one reason may be that postmodern dance challenges ingrained ideas about the "theatrical" and doesn't tell spectators what to think, or, as Foster notes, "how to watch" (185).

How else, then, might we envision the experience of criticism and critical writing and draw young writers in? What might be some new modes for engaging them? One way is simply to expose them to different ideas about performance criticism. Near the beginning of each semester, I have students read the late performance historian Michael Kirby's unveiled polemic, "Criticism: Four Faults." From the get-go he states: "Theatrical criticism, as we know it, is primitive and naïve, arrogant, and immoral" (1974, 59). He calls "pseudo-objective" the kind of judgmental criticism that is essentially more about the reviewer's own taste and preferences than the work itself. Many critics, Kirby notes, "objectify their taste, confuse description and evaluation, and substitute subjective feeling for objective detail" (66). An avowed formalist, Kirby goes on to promote what he calls "performance documentation," a totally value-free criticism unburdened by the reviewer's own subjective views or judgments of the performance, and one that will function as an historical record of what occurred, how audiences reacted to a piece, and the impact the work had in its social and political moment. Kirby's abandonment of the subjective altogether makes his proposition problematic; surely, one of the pleasures of reading criticism is to be moved by another's description and understanding of a performance and thereby discover, as Edwin Denby explained, "an unexpected aspect of one's own sensibility" (1947/1968, 414). But from a pedagogical perspective Kirby's essay is useful because it stirs up students' ire in a usually productive way that challenges their assumptions.

Kirby was writing from the position of scholar/critic, but it also can be helpful to have students read essays by, or hear from, working critics on their relationship to their craft. I have in the past invited to my class cultural arts critic Matthew Gurewitsch (a writer for the *New York Times,* and other publications, on theater, opera, and dance) who offers the refreshing view that criticism is not just about reviewing. Gurewitsch tells students that what motivates him to write every day is to think about a subject that arouses his interest or creativity. "What kind of world do I want to live in?" asks Gurewitsch. "Making people curious is my aim," he has said.

In a revealing *New York Times* piece, "Critics Should Look at Art But Also at

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Themselves," cultural critic Margo Jefferson responds to a question a friend asked her about what she, as a critic, would like to change about the way critics work. Jefferson says that she would

> like us to ask questions as vehemently as we sling judgments. We're still inclined to believe that critical authority comes mostly from assertion or virtuoso displays of intellectual mastery. What about intelligent questions asked forthrightly? What about admitting sometimes that we're not sure we're asking all that needs to be asked? And what about ambivalence? Well expressed ambivalence is as interesting in criticism as mixed motives in fiction or microtones in music. (2000, E2)

Jefferson urges the critic to be open to artwork beyond her traditional purview, to be up front about one's own biases, and to risk balancing vulnerability with a sense of authority.

In another example, novelist and essayist Joyce Carol Oates, in a piece in the *New York Review of Books,* builds on this idea of the "self-effacement" of the critic as a characteristic to be admired. She quotes from a passage in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* to make her point. In the opening scene, as Oates recounts, an observer comments on the eminent writer Gustav von Aschenbach: "'[He] always lived like this'—here the speaker closed the fingers of his left hand to a fist—'never like this'—and he let his open hand hang relaxed from the back of his chair.'" Says Oates, "What more appropriate image for the art of criticism: the tightly closed fist, the open and relaxed hand? The one concerned with defining boundaries, passing judgment, inflicting punishment; the other with presenting the subject sympathetically, pushing beyond boundaries, a predilection for appreciation and praise?" "Contrary to what might be assumed," says Oates, "it is far easier for the critic to revile than to reveal" (2007).

Another strategy, both in the classroom and perhaps (dare I say) within the professional world of criticism, might be to try to narrow the gap between writer and performer so that *each* might see themselves as contributing to the critical and artistic enterprise. In the mid-1960s iconoclastic performance and dance critic Jill Johnston claimed that criticism was a place for the writer to "stake out a claim to be an artist" (1965/1971, 100). As Ann Daly has noted, Johnston "took seriously the [Judson dancers'] credo that meaning is made by the viewer and that anyone could be a performer" (2002b, xxvii). In her 1965 essay "Critics' Critics" (in part a response to a blistering article on the state of contemporary criticism by Clive Barnes), Johnston argued for a type of creativity that might include the writers' own visceral response to the work and a writing style that evinces the style of the dance. She comments, too, on the long, historical tradition of the artist's statement and urges more dancers and choreographers to "practice the art of writing about their work" (101). Reading more of these kinds of artist statements, and including them in their *own* critiques, might offer students a different understanding of what dancers themselves experience in the *process* of choreography itself. It might foster more of an internal exchange with the dancers' ideas to disavow the still prevalent notion of the critic's role as "speaking for" the "mute" dancer.

And, finally, what if we could engage our student writers with actual dancers and

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choreographers, invite them to the classroom (or make the classroom the studio) and have them share their work and their ideas and insights about their work? Choreographer Liz Lerman's "civic dialogues," for instance, in which she engages community members as part of the creative process, may be a way to think about bringing writers closer to performers. In her *Critical Response Process*—subtitled "A Method for Getting Useful Feedback on Anything You Make, from Dance to Dessert" (2003)—Lerman employs a four-step system that involves a series of structured questions posed to both the performer and a respondent; the idea is to help audience members deepen their understanding of the work and help artists push their thinking further. Lerman's interest in writing about her dancing stemmed, in part, from her desire to "give myself a voice" in response to the varied critics writing about her work (1995, 1). More than a "feel-good" exercise for both parties, as Ann Daly has noted, her process, which she developed in 1990, has evolved into "a truly dialogic model characterized by moments of what she [Lerman] calls 'colliding truths'" (2002c, 10).

It's interesting to think about what type of critical exchanges might get ignited if, employing Lerman's model, the critic became the "respondent" in dialogue with the artist. It is true, of course, that artists and critics have different missions and preoccupations, but a closer coming together of the two might break down and demystify a process that too often pits the all-knowing and educated critic against the intuitive, nonthinking dancer/performer.

I realize that I have emphasized what young writer-critics seem *not* to be doing, but I am of course encouraged and delighted when they do begin to break through their own resistances and get underneath the surface of the work, as in one student's critique of Bill T. Jones's *Still Here,* which she refers to as a "brashly bold piece" that "stings the senses and hurls the hearts of its viewers into rapid palpitations of agony and ecstasy." Or another, on Elizabeth Streb's "aerial creatures": "Once airborne, their bodies take the forms of beautiful birds, backs arched, one leg tightly pressed against the other, arms longing to reach the corners of the ceiling and, as their faces stretch to confront the audience's, they happily scream their names."[2] It's these stirrings and glimmers that give me hope—when the writers begin to open their eyes, see with their senses, and behold what is there to be seen.

Extending Critical Voices Between the Lecture Room and the Dance Studio

Ann Nugent

The majority of students come to us at the University of Chichester in the United Kingdom, where I am a dance lecturer, because they want to develop careers as dancers, choreographers, or dance teachers.[3] They are usually attracted by the opportunity to improve their dance technique and/or *to be creative* rather than to align themselves with the more conventional avenues of academia, and for most writing will never be a career contender.[4]

I teach writing courses at M.A. and undergraduate levels and find that students are often uncomfortable about letting their

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