Dance Dramaturgy

Modes of Agency, Awareness and Engagement

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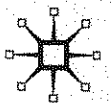

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Field Notes: In the Studio with Ralph Lemon and Donald Byrd

Katherine Profeta and Thomas F. DeFrantz

The reflections that follow derive from a panel discussion, "Dramaturgical Reports from the Field," at the 2011 SDHS conference on Dance Dramaturgy, which also included Talvin Wilks, dramaturg for Bebe Miller. That discussion grew into a written exchange that further developed some of its themes: the nature of dramaturgical labour, with its oscillation or split focus; the notion of a "simpatico moment" (Wilks' term) when the dramaturgical relationship revealed its possibility; the intertwining of the dramaturgical/collaborative relationship with the interpersonal relationship; and the notion of a productive tension between the choreographic and dramaturgical voices in the process.

What do we do as dramaturgs?

Profeta: collaborative motion

Like many other dramaturgs, I have grown tired of this question, but I also understand why it continues to come up; the role is and needs to be responsive and adaptable. I think any of us who claim this title keep a list of terms in mind that we can either support or refute as models for the dramaturgical role. The list probably goes something like this: researcher, historian, questioner, editor, literary manager, outside eye, inside eye, advocate for the audience, advocate for anything *but* the audience, midwife, gadfly, and even amateur therapist. Many of these terms are discredited in one way or another, but I wonder if something of use still lies in their assembled collection, specifically in all their clashes and intersections.

What seems most consistent here is change itself, the fact that my role in a rehearsal room can and does oscillate between any of these descriptors. And that this oscillation does not only concern the job description, but also my level of involvement. Sometimes I am completely wrapped up in the process, at other times I can disappear for a month and then return to the rehearsal room to watch in a way that is usefully different from the view of those who remained. This movement makes dramaturgs uniquely free and flexible to respond to the needs of the work at hand. In the kind of work I like most – devised theatre and dance performances – that flexibility is particularly valuable, as the terms of the performance remain in flux, often radically so, for quite a long period. It might be argued that dramaturgs' shape-shifting makes their employment particularly vulnerable to the vicissitudes of interpersonal relationships – if we are not having productive interactions with the other folks in the room, then there is no other more stable reason for us to be there. Yet, I would reply that the dramaturg only exposes the extent to which *all* collaborative art-making is based on the vicissitudes of interpersonal relationships. Sure, if the dramaturg has no fruitful connection with other members of the creative staff he or she might be out of a job right away, whereas if the lighting designer has no connection, well, we probably still need lights for opening night. But that lighting designer will not have a job with that group of collaborators the next time around.

It is also true that in the age of devised performance, YouTube, and Google, all collaborators frequently participate in the act of dramaturgy, as all may discuss and shape the structure of the piece while it evolves and bring new research materials into the rehearsal room. Thus dramaturg as a singular role takes on a negative definition, she is the only one in the room with no reason to be there *except* to support the dramaturgical. Myriam Van Imschoot wrote in 2003 about this trend as a trigger for "anxious dramaturgy," since the stable job description threatens to dissolve into its adjective (to be clear, she welcomed that collapse; 63). I like to think that the democratisation of the dramaturgical just causes more dramaturgy, and where there is more, it is valued, and there is a hospitable environment for those who have no other agenda but to take on dramaturgical tasks, do them well, and keep doing them over the long arc of a choreographer's career.

DeFrantz: split focus and process reflection

It strikes me HARD that discussions of the work of dramaturgy often hinge on a characterisation of the ways in which a fragile, but enduring relationship sustains itself between dramaturg and artist. But one part of the equation – the dramaturg and her labour – may be disposed of, or easily characterised as somehow irrelevant. This concept of intellectual labour as excess also comes into dance studies writing at large: the idea that dance does not need studies to fulfill itself; likewise, that dance does not need dramaturgy to recognise itself as dance. And yet, engagement with dance dramaturgy continues to rise, as evidenced by the emergence of professional programs and academic sites of inquiry into dance and dramaturgy.

For me, acting as a dance dramaturg means being flexible to the experience in a way that is entirely analogous to being a performer in the work. As a dramaturg, I have input to the process and shape of the work, to be sure, but I also know that most of my ideas, input, and energy will go into the oversised hopper that is the rehearsal and development process. Only a tiny bit of our creative ideas will become something to be honed and shared with others not involved in the process – those people we used to call audience and that we often now call witnesses, guides, attendees, players, participants, gamers, or users. Being flexible in the process is what there is, while simultaneously watching the process and helping it to recognise itself and its motility. This concept might be akin to that of oscillation, which Profeta introduced above, but I tend to think of it as a split focus, simultaneously inside and outside the work.

Maybe this sort of split focus is the most important activity I can engage in as a dramaturg. I need to be involved in the process, and willing to bring in great ideas, terrible ideas, no ideas, my research, my intuition, my crush on this performer or that one, my reading of the news that day, my writing of the always-needed and always-in-process program notes, my discomfort with no palpable sense of order. I bring these into the room, alongside my written-down and body-catalogued, detailed information from the preceding encounters with these artists, and this work, and the work from before. I have to be inside and outside time simultaneously; really here in this moment trying to figure out what is happening, and really there helping to remind us all what happened before and how we and

others responded. I tend to think of this split focus as something akin to the "double consciousness" that W. E. B. DuBois theorised at the turn of the 20th century, when he wrote of the ways that African American people constantly double-process experience in order to survive the racialised moment. Of course, my work as a dramaturg seldom arrives as politically charged as the heinous circumstances that continually surround black life in the United States; Trayvon Martin's murder offers 21st century evidence of the bold disregard for black life that continues to take root in the world. My dramaturgical presence intends to connect aspects of everyday experience – like our responses to Martin's killing – to the events of the work in development and the rehearsal hall.

I aim to bring an open energy into the rehearsal room, one that can surely be sullied and compressed or expanded, but one that can also account for what came before in this room, and the conversations and encounters that led to this room. In many ways, my labour as a dramaturg is more particular and expansive than that of the performer creating new work, in that there is always an assumption that the dramaturg's work never ends and expands throughout the process, always finding a way to account for everything that has happened. While others can forget the material that is discarded, the dramaturg becomes the collected memory of the process and is not really allowed to forget what happened and how we came to be here.

A dramaturg, then, may be much like a professor or a theorist in that she seeks ways to account for experience – the experience of the rehearsal process, and then possibly the performance process as well. Her advocacy for the act of this accounting is really the labour at hand; she adds to the creation, yes, but she is also responsible for remembering what has been contributed and removed. This is what good educators do as well, I think, make choices that allow others to navigate an ever-expanding raft of information. In the case of dramaturgy, we create pathways for the collaborators to recognise each other, and engage an audience (or participants, and so on) in ways that answer the encounters of the rehearsal process. Sometimes I also think of this split focus, double consciousness labour as process reflection. I take it as my responsibility to wonder, "What are we offering to the world in this work, what are we saying by these gestures?" I offer back reflection on the process to all the collaborators, and consider

ways in which our work together reflects back into the world that we share outside the rehearsal hall.

Who are we collaborating with?

DeFrantz: virtuosity generator Donald Byrd

Donald Byrd has enjoyed a varied career, creating work for ballet companies, film and television, stage and musical theatre, and contemporary dance. After study at Yale, the London School of Contemporary Dance, and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Center, he performed with Twyla Tharp, Karole Armitage, and Gus Solomons Jr. before he formed Donald Byrd/The Group in 1978. He created over 100 works for his own company and others, including the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, the Joffrey Ballet, and Spectrum Dance Theater of Seattle, Washington, where he has been Artistic Director since 2002. His dances often deal with social themes such as racism (*The Minstrel Show,* 1991), domestic violence (*The Beast,* 1996), and contemporary versions of the classical repertory (*Life Situations: Daydreams on Giselle,* 1995). His full-length *The Harlem Nutcracker* (1996, music D. Ellington, B. Strayhorn, and D. Berger from themes by Tchaikovsky) reworked the familiar ballet as a celebration of the fortitude of the African American family through years of social change. I have worked with Donald as an occasional dramaturg since 2000.

Profeta: reinventor Ralph Lemon

Ralph Lemon's career as a choreographer, performer, and visual artist has thus far passed through three stages – at a minimum. Emerging in NYC in the mid-1980s, he spent 1985 to 1995 as the head of an eponymous dance company. After disbanding the company in 1995, he began the *Geography Trilogy*, in which he challenged facets of his own self-understanding (race, culture, religion) through collaboration with performers from other locations. Ralph worked first with West African performers in *Geography* (1997), then with Asian performers in *Tree* (2000). For the third part, *Come home Charley Patton* (2004), he invited African and African American performers to help him explore the often-charged history and mythology of the American South. In 2010, *How Can You Stay in the House All Day and Not Go Anywhere* was a hinge from one stage to the next. It reworked choreographic

material from *Patton* and, at the same time, looked forward to a more conceptual, anti-choreographic stance. Since then Ralph has worked increasingly outside the margins of the concert dance stage, developing visual/video art and conceptual performance, and curating other artists' work. I have served as Ralph's dramaturg since the beginning of the *Geography Trilogy* in 1997 and we continue our dialogue to this day.

The simpatico moment

Profeta: similarity and contrast

I began working with Ralph under conditions that had nothing to do with simpatico. I was assigned to him. He had never worked with a dramaturg before, but that year, with his new *Geography* commission up at Yale, the drama school faculty assigned him not just one but two student dramaturgs, and told him to make use of us somehow. As a student, I did not meet Ralph on anything like equal terms. I was to serve him but I could not be trusted, since clearly I was still green. In return for my questionable service he would provide me with an experiential education.

Our initial sit-down was pleasant, but vague. I could see he was a nice guy who had no idea what to do with me. His one request was that I keep a notebook of daily observations on *Geography*'s rehearsal room. Since this was to be an experimental intercultural dance theatre piece, devised with his cast of one other African American and seven West African performers, he may have known that the way the piece was made would be just as interesting as the final product, and that we would want to fold process back into product. On the other hand, he may have just been giving me busywork.

As the one-month initial workshop went on, I faithfully recorded the rehearsal room. I wrote down steps, discussions, arguments, brainstorming. Sometimes I transcribed as fast as my hand could move. Sometimes I jumped up to join the discussions as a second-string interpreter (my intermediate-level French got sharper and more Africanised as the month went on) and only later entered a summary in my log book. Everything I wrote was, of course, filtered through my perception of what was interesting, relevant, surprising, or useful. Since our point of departure was the difficulties and rewards

of intercultural understanding across the African diaspora, I tried to notice how those difficulties and rewards were manifesting day to day.

In July 1997, a month after the first workshop had closed, I met Ralph in a NYC café and dropped a 169-page transcription – thunk – onto the little round table in front of him. He may have been surprised at how much there was. He read it over the next few weeks and we found our simpatico. I think he saw me seeing him. What was at stake here, and what fueled our increasingly involved conversations from that point onwards, was both the similarity and the contrast in our ways of seeing. The baseline simpatico came from his recognition that my way of seeing was in sufficient harmony with his own. Yet he had to also recognise enough of a contrast for my work to be useful, for who wants to stare into a mirror all day?

So I place that simpatico moment at the moment the manuscript changed hands. From that point on Ralph was interested in what the process and the piece looked like through my eyes, and we had a burgeoning collaborative conversation with a promising level of give and take. It would take another project for me to fully grow out of the student role with which I had entered the relationship. And once I stopped playing student I also stopped transcribing every last detail from the rehearsal room, which was both a loss and a relief. However, that is how it all began, by sharing the act of seeing.

DeFrantz: reverberating personalities

In the early 1990s, my sister, who rarely attends dance performances, told me excitedly about a show she had seen in Los Angeles by choreographer Donald Byrd. At that point I did not know Donald personally, but I knew enough about my sister's taste to start paying better attention to his work. Donald was infamous in New York dance circles as a harsh, bad-boy compositional technician who exploited the facility of his collaborators toward nearly impossible ends; someone who made lots of dances packed with lots of movement for dancers who liked to work at the edge of what they could do. At the time I was writing occasional pieces for the *Village Voice*, and I came to understand Donald's work within a continuum of choreography produced by a growing cohort of artists of colour circulating in New York.

Sometime in 1996, I received a call from an administrator of Donald Byrd/The Group. Would I be willing to write an academic

article about this work? I found this direct approach to be cheeky and clever. Why not reach out to an academic and ask him to become involved in the work of an artist seeking more focused critical attention? By this time I had met Donald and chatted briefly with him about his work, and while I did not write that particular article, I got involved in the company's operations around that time. I started preparing program notes for new works and educational materials for programs that the company sent on tour. As we spent more time together, we found many similarities in our backgrounds: undergraduate study at Yale; experience in music and theatre as well as dance; an abiding interest in racial politics surrounding artistic practices; an awareness of complex sexualities that correspond to anti-racist, feminist creativity in the world; and an interest in contemporary ballet.

Our simpatico moment came in 2001 when Donald saw an article I wrote for the annual "sex in the first person" issue of the *Village Voice*. At the time, I had braces on my teeth, and I wrote about my trials performing oral sex given that circumstance. Something about the dissonance from the "academic me" to the "publically-sexualised me" cheered Donald, and he warmed immeasurably to our collaboration. In retrospect, I believe the shift was caused by the revelation of my edgier, shadow-self improbably aligned with a clearly black bourgeois upbringing. Here, my instincts and actions somehow reverberated with Donald's frequent exploration of shadow-selves and the darker edges of human behaviour.

I entered a relationship with Donald as a journalist and scholar of dance, and we both appreciated the chance to share a depth of ideas about dance histories and contemporary work with each other. Unlike the relationship of Profeta and Lemon, our status with each other arrived at a commensurate place. As we grew to know each other better, I understood that Donald had endured many challenges in his creative and emotional life, and was in transition from the violent taskmaster who demolished dancers with unkind words and gestures, to the stern, but nurturing collaborating artist and mentor he has become today. Then and now, a preoccupation with aesthetic precision permeates his work, and this is likely what had first drawn my sister to appreciate his style 20 years ago. When he took the position as Artistic Director of Spectrum Dance in Seattle, Washington, in 2002, I made time to travel to Seattle as often as possible to collaborate

on the literary translation of his work into text, and eventually, to act as dramaturg.

Sounding the dramaturgical voice

DeFrantz: staging the dramaturg

Donald prepares intently for each rehearsal process, and I often have the feeling that he knows what he wants to discover long before anyone else has signed onto the project at hand. This means that he has already struggled with himself around the work, and will use the process to prove his assumptions. This does not apply to actual movement sequences, or the execution of movement, or lighting, costume, or setting; for these, he relies on the collaborating abilities of everyone involved. But the largest questions and issues of his work are drawn before we communicate, and the process seldom veers from those questions. Donald notices elements or performances that distract from these core questions and chooses to remove or re-imagine them. But when a collaborator brings in something that amplifies the central concerns of the work – research materials, a lighting effect, a movement sequence, a costuming choice – these elements are incorporated into the whole, typically without comment.

On the *Sleeping Beauty Notebook* project (2000–2005), we began with conversations about histories of the original 1890 production, the physical terms of dancing at the Marinsky Theater in that era as related by various chroniclers of ballet, and thoughts about the enduring nature of the Tchaikovsky score. Early on, Donald decided to retain the orchestral score, even if it might be chopped and mixed quite a bit, and I became responsible for designing a series of supertitles that could demonstrate the out-of-sequence and fragmentary nature of the work. As we deconstructed the narrative truths of the story, theoretical realms of inquiry came to the fore of our work together. In two examples, our consideration of an awakening after 100 years of sleep led to disability studies and explorations of the trauma that might be cast on a body held in suspended animation for such a long time; a perusal of the Petipa choreography for the "Rose Adagio" encouraged physical explorations of pedestrian-styled social dance eruptions amid the pageantry of Aurora's coming-out ball. Hurricane Katrina stunned the United States during our development

process, and discussions of Carabosse's anger led to critical race studies and careful thinking about how African Americans have continually been forgotten at the feast of American abundance. Like Carabosse, we realised too many black New Orleans residents were turned away from potential help and communion offered to other Americans. As these events unfolded, an important theme of the production came into focus as an exploration of Carabosse's rage, as a result of her disavowal from the abundance of the oyal court, was likened to the rage that black Americans routinely feel, and suppress, in varied disingenuous racialised encounters. As this theme materialised, we started to talk openly about the *black affect* that allows white performers to embody gestures routinely recognised as markers of black identity. These gestures, and their materialisations of *black presence*, became a point of structural underpinning for the project.

Eventually, my presence as dramaturg came to be incorporated into the actual production, as the dramaturg's voice, or a scholarly

Figure 8.1 Discussing the undiscussable: resonances of race in ballet, Thomas F. DeFrantz in *The Sleeping Beauty Notebook*, choreography by Donald Byrd, New York, 2005 (photo by Chris Bennion)

dance facilitator's voice, came on to the stage to engage the audience in conversation about the themes of the work, especially in relation to Carabosse and African American rage. This was unexpected territory for all of us, I imagine, and hopefully of some interest for audiences. Critics inevitably noted that the dramaturg took the stage during the work, rather than afterwards in some sort of traditional artist talk format. The creative choice to move in this direction emerged without warning during rehearsals; I started performing the task thinking of myself as a stand-in for the choreographer and the intellectual ambition of the work as a whole. But eventually, I came to think of myself as a performer in the work, with creative agency and a responsibility to guide the audience through a pointed discussion of our reflection on the work we were in the process of witnessing together. This performing experience shifted, yet again, my sense of split focus and double consciousness as they relate to my experience as dramaturg. In this case, I would begin by watching the performance and the audience from within the audience, but then launch myself onto the stage, interrupting the action somewhere in the middle of the work, my tasks physically embedded within its very structure.

While this became my role in the finished work, at two shows in New York, Donald took over this role himself; in later versions of the work that toured, this section of the dramaturgical turn was removed from the piece completely. In this creative, but odd turn of events, I felt my presence as a dramaturg both valorised and transformed. Acting onstage in the work helped me understand the role of dance dramaturgy in an unprecedented, experiential way that literally demonstrated for the audience an intellectual, outside-the-dancing presence connected to strands of creative invention inside the performance at hand. But being replaced by the choreographer demonstrated how unnecessary my physical presence, or that of any individual dramaturg, could also be. Like dancers in many performance situations, a dramaturg can be replaced by the choreographer as needed. This also refers to a truth that Profeta noted, that a dramaturg's presence is not always necessary for dance, but dance is always necessary for dance dramaturgy.

My relationship with Donald has surely shifted throughout our work together, and by 2015 I count him among my closest friends. In many ways, the closeness of choreographer and dramaturg is to be

Figure 8.2 After 100 years of sleep, *The Sleeping Beauty Notebook*, choreography by Donald Byrd, New York, 2005 (photo by Chris Bennion)

expected, as the sharing of emotional and intellectual lives are the currency of exchange for the relationship.

Profeta: productive tension

Disagreement always came up in my collaboration with Ralph, even early on when I was the student dramaturg. I realised that I had a certain power in being powerless. I felt free to shoot from the hip and tell him whatever I was seeing or thinking, because I assumed that if he did not think it was relevant, he would be able to dismiss it as the immature musings of a student. Thus, I shared opinions – diplomatically, but without pulling punches on content – that I knew he might not agree with. And he did not always agree. In *Geography*, the first part of the *Trilogy*, my notes often had to do with the legibility of the narrative content of the work. We had a stated plan to engage the plot and characters of the *Oresteia*. I was training at a literary-based theatre school, and I wondered for the longest time why letting the story come to the fore was not more of a priority. In the end, we discovered that we cared more about the story of the rehearsal room, and yet my critical inquiry was still of use. Perhaps in part because I was willing not to be right, my questions catalysed the issue of how we were using the *Oresteia* and

forced us to realise, sooner rather than later, that we had to shift our idea of what we were building to respond to the real source of inspiration. I did not need to win the argument, but both the project and I did need Ralph to clarify his intentions by better explaining why I was wrong.

Thus, there is faith that a certain kind of disagreement can be a crucible for the work; a disagreement which will eventually have to be won by the person or people who claim the directorial role, but the dramaturg is there to help supply that process, that productive tension.

This came to a head with *Come home Charley Patton*, the third piece in the *Trilogy*. Disagreements became more uncomfortable. I was more wrapped up in this process creatively, attending very early workshops and directing various propositions in rehearsal when Ralph was busy elsewhere. At the same time, the work was more personal for Ralph; he was returning to his home culture after gazing outwards at African and Asian cultures. He approached the American South as a ground zero for African American experience, and here I was, his white dramaturg, whose ruddy cheeks threatened that she might not really, fundamentally, understand. Last but not least, the nature of his research material, preoccupied in part with the grave history of racial violence against black Americans, pushed me out of my innocuous stance. It made me feel the stakes were higher for the legibility of his research, and I embraced that advocate for the audience role with new zeal.

So our real showdown, the first one that made me question whether our collaboration would survive opening night, was over this issue of poetic indirection versus direct communication. These were not new battle lines, but the research's gravity (for both of us) and personal nature (for Ralph) raised the stakes. For instance, I thought that a piece of choreography based on keywords generated from the narratives of historical lynching – a choreography of gestures, abstract at first glance, but deeply loaded just under the surface – might miss its mark if the audience were not let in, one way or another, on the context that had generated it. Yet Ralph rejected all my fledgling proposals for how that could be achieved as too blatant and reductive. I did understand his reluctance, he was worried about cliché, and worried that once the big word *lynching* was uttered there would be no more access to the specificity of the

atrocities he was looking at, or to the specificity of his response. In retrospect, I think this was a productive tension, but in the moment it just felt tense.

Insofar as we ever found a resolution, it was thanks to the concept of the counter-memorial – a type of anti-monument, conceptual and/or ephemeral, which marks a process of memory, but does not try to substitute something solid and known for the absences of the past. We had both been fascinated by the idea of counter-memorial since the early days of research, when Ralph had started using that word to describe his private, performative research at various sites of historical violence. Where memorials may actually trigger forgetting, because the viewer displaces a responsibility to remember onto the inanimate monument, a counter-memorial is crafted to trigger thought. Its very incompleteness triggers memory, be it direct memory, or vicarious memory, or blood memory. When Ralph and the cast were on a workshop in Berlin, Ralph had visited a famous counter-memorial to the Holocaust, a negative-space fountain, essentially a hole in the ground with rushing water, marking the spot where an earlier fountain contributed by a Jewish merchant had been torn down. This counter-memorial was designed to make the viewer confront absence, to complete the memorial process by wondering, "What is missing here?"

I began speaking about his reluctance to utter the word lynching as a reluctance to build a memorial, a monument, too solid and known, which would trigger forgetting instead of thought. But I suggested that if we simply edited out all references to racial violence from the work, we would not be creating a counter-memorial either, we would just be pruning that branch of thought entirely. What we needed in this piece was a *present absence*; we needed, just as with the negative-space monument, to feel the space where the word lynching would go. At the same time what he and I needed in the rehearsal room, and finally found, was not the crucible of disagreement, but a more complex conversation; not just butting heads on how present or absent his research would be in the work, but rather discussing how the work might engage with presence and absence. A productive tension is only a starting point; from there it requires labour, dialogue, and an openness to recognise potential answers when later, exhausted, you stumble across them and they look nothing like what anyone first had in mind.

Figure 8.3 Djédjé Gervais, David Thomson, and Gesel Mason in *Come Home Charley Patton,* 2004 (photo by Dan Merlo)

Why do you continue to do this?

Profeta: catalysing what surprises

At this point in our discussion I am going to let Ralph speak. Ralph has his own narrative of our relationship, one facet of which appears in his published art journal of the *Come home Charley Patton* process:

> I imagine walking on stage, into a spotlight, holding a trumpet, my grandfather's trumpet, ...
>
> I begin by saying this: To dance about a place you have to ...
>
> And then I turn my back to the audience, ask a stagehand for a microphone and stand, and now amplified, continue (with little sense of humor).
>
> Will it be useful talking about what's about to happen, or might we leave it to the wordless thought process of the body, my body? I ask ....
>
> I began with dance as biological physical theater, the theater of my body forming language. I now reside in my dance as a terrifically

> broad question of existence or a series of questions of existen
> These impossible questions become my practice.
>
> And then Katherine... Katherine as Mattie, as Mamie Till-Mobl
> as Memphis Minnie, as Mrs. Helen Kent, as Frank Stokes,
> Mississippi Fred Mcdowell, as one-hundred-year-old Walter Cart
> as Bruce Nauman, as James Baldwin... planted, stands and calls o
> from the audience, "Questions? What are these impossible que
> tions? Maybe you can't answer them, but do you have to obscu
> them? What would happen if you stopped right there where yo
> are, turned around to face us, started over and articulated them
> detail? Would that be so bad?"
>
> That would be awful, I think to myself, pretending to be a litt
> shocked that Katherine has interrupted me. No, I say, I won't sto
> I can't stop and I won't turn around; it is my passion. (And now
> begin to raise my voice.) And in defense of my passions, I obscur
> I obscure because my real life is spirited, yes, but also sloppy an
> mundane. I obscure from you most of what I eat, sleep, and shit...
> share and show only what I find possible to construct, think
> imagine, (mask?) outside of the prosaic dailyness of my existence
> I share and show a bunch of deliberately different questions to th
> audiences outside of my own private thinking and questioning
> These public questions, questions developed because of an audi
> ence, are questions I can direct, and articulate, fictively....
>
> So maybe before there are questions, any questions, there is only
> discursive thinking. Life, unpackaged, unpresentable. Voiceless.
> And by obscuring I'm allowed to have a voice ...
>
> The audience applauds.
>
> Now, may I continue? I say, quite moved by this response.
>
> "Yes, please, go on, I'd like to hear the rest," Katherine, she, he,
> they say. (Lemon 206–207)

Note that Ralph, holding a trumpet, turns his back to the audi-
ence – just like Miles Davis did, rejecting images of the black man
as a pandering entertainer. Note also that when he turns around he
asks for a microphone; he is certainly still aware that the audience
is there, and wants to be heard by them, but also wants to claim
the right to obscure the frontal view. And note that I yell out from
that same audience. This position is familiar to me both literally and

figuratively, I have spent days of my life sitting in empty auditoriums, doing my thinking from where the audience would go. I sit to represent other potential audiences, as I do in Ralph's image. Racially it gets complex, since in this image my white face is representing a host of black faces, and my back-talking voice speaking (presumably) for theirs. Am I doing them any justice, or just usurping?

What I yell out in this fantasy scenario is an actual quote from an actual email I once wrote Ralph. In response, he does not do what I said to do, of course not. But in answering me, a third thing is catalysed, which ends up surprising and moving him, and me, and really all of us sitting out there in the dark. It is a fantasy, but a good one.

This is how it is supposed to work, the oscillating dramaturg – shifting roles to meet the demands of the process, moving from inside to outside the work and back again, always eyes wide open – catalyses a process. When that process would not have happened otherwise, the value of the intervention is clear. But even if it would have happened anyway, thus catalyzed it may happen more efficiently, or more elegantly, or at a more fortuitous time. And I feel close enough to these ideals, enough of the time, to want to keep at it.

Figure 8.4 Katherine Profeta and Ralph Lemon in rehearsal, 2014 (photo provided by Maggie Allesee, National Center for Choreography)

DeFrantz: unalienated labour

My work as a dramaturg for Donald speaks to my own desire to create art and communication that can be shared with audiences to enliven social relationships. At its core, my belief in our work together astonishes me at each encounter. There is something in Donald's approach and result that speaks to me, deeply, as it poses questions and responses to the capacity of dance to communicate and challenge our shared expectations of social possibility. Donald's work challenges dancers, collaborators, and audiences in equal parts; it is never easy, and – although at times I may feel it is somehow obvious in its construction – it is dark and unsettling at its core. I vibrate sympathetically with this making of contemporary work that wonders at questions of race, class, gender, and sexuality in ways that encourage me to revive my interest in dance and its technical execution. Donald believes in technical ability as a marker of the communicative power of dancing practice, and his unshakeable faith in physical expertise enlivens my interest in physical capacity. At times I think of working with Donald as unalienated labour: as a challenging of craft and creativity; as holding an opinion and validating a point of view; as finding physical analogues for theoretical suppositions; and as exploring the current moment in terms of ever-present movement. This is what I always value about working as a dramaturg for dance, the possibility to connect my varied interests with the creation of live art that can encourage us to act. How could I stop doing something that provides me so very much reflective physical, intellectual, and emotional enlargement?

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9

Dance Dramaturgy as a Process of Learning: *koosil-ja's mech[a] OUTPUT*

Nanako Nakajima with performing koosil-ja

Prologue

Noh Theatre is officially recognised as a national property of Japan. Historically, classic Noh Theatre values are a closed tradition/system that makes it very difficult for contemporary audiences to appreciate a performance without sufficient cultural background or knowledge of the traditions that inform the production's content. In order to facilitate meaningful access to traditional Noh for a wider audience, the media performance of koosil-ja's *mech[a]OUTPUT* connects the closed

Figure 9.1 Nanako starts to recite her texts, while koosil-ja starts walking silently on the stage (photo provided by koosil-ja)