



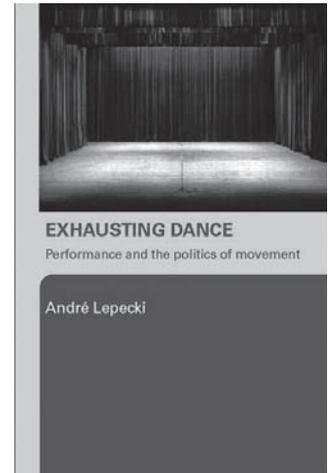
Project  
**MUSE**<sup>®</sup>  
*Scholarly journals online*

# Books

***Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement.*** By André Lepecki. London: Routledge, 2006; 160 pp. \$35.95 paper.

What can philosophy do for dance? In broad strokes, Western philosophy seeks to universalize experience, to encourage rumination from one author's perspective that might offer insights of use to many. Dance, though, hopes to explore the particular gesture, the particular release of energy, the particular moment of possibility without desire for broad appeal. Odd bedfellows, philosophy and dance have spawned a tiny literature concerned with aspects of Western theatrical dance, explored in large part by men (Sparshott 1988 and 1995; Fancher and Myers 1981) and phenomenological approaches to body knowledge, largely offered up by women (Foster et al. 2005; Fraleigh 1996 and 2004; Sheets-Johnston 1966). Although a palpable line of gender divides the discussion, this constant emerges: Philosophy tends to push conversations around dance away from physical movement toward a space of contemplation, where bodies can become interchangeable, and, in many ways, irrelevant.

Theorist André Lepecki's project, crystallized in *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement* and extended in recent *TDR* articles,<sup>1</sup> involves centering current European philosophical trends on analyses of Europeanist dance theatre artistry. Here, as in previous philosophical explorations of dance, readers will immediately note the dominant Europeanist tendency to universalize "the politics of movement" through a blankly heterosexualized masculine whiteness. Politics, in this volume, involves the recovery of poststructuralist analysis for the field of dance, such that the individuated spectator's position may be privileged above other possibilities, which might include group communion, spiritual wellness, holistic expression, or social justice, to name a few politically progressive lenses of analysis and practices absent from this study. Here, readers will encounter an enthusiastic embrace of the current cadre of philosophers writ large for performance studies scholars concerned with bodies as texts—Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan. Be warned: Lepecki offers no summary overviews of these various writers or their methodologies, and if you haven't read their work recently, you will not find your way through this volume. Following the lead set by most English-language translations of Martin Heidegger, the book trades in an aggressive resistance to literary clarity, one that requires several careful perusals in order to comprehend the perspective at hand. Simultaneously intriguing and confounding, this small book predicts the rise of Europeanist ideologies for dance studies in the United States, a bourgeois retreat into travel to dance festivals and art



1. See *TDR* 50:4 (T192) Winter 2006, Dance and Philosophy section, guest editor André Lepecki, with articles by Peter Sloterdijk, José Gil, and Jenn Joy. Here, Lepecki hopes to introduce to the "vastly U.S.-dominated field of dance studies other voices and theoretical perspectives on dance—voices and perspectives coming from countries and traditions with little or no exposure in the U.S. (or in the Anglophone world)—and particularly with little or no exposure in the current canon of dance studies in the U.S. (or Anglophone) academy" (17). But surely Lepecki understands that Anglophone does not set limits for Europeanist ideologies, which cohere through Western philosophical traditions no matter the language being voiced.

galleries as a standard of dance research,<sup>2</sup> and a displacement of progressive minoritarian performance practices for the sake of a new canon of (unmarked) white dance artistry.<sup>3</sup>

The book intrigues in its historical analysis of the terms of motion within modernity. An introductory chapter proposes that Western conceptions of choreography emerged as “a peculiar invention of early modernity, as a technology that creates a body disciplined to move according to the commands of writing” (6). Lepecki then rethinks how stillness in dance offers a way to foreground being in performance, a way to resist contemporary proclivities for constant motion effectively bound up with concepts of subjection and self-imprisonment. A goal in these analyses, then, might be to reopen a space for the consideration of modernity’s ends; to consider how a body onstage in stillness could enable unexpected subjectivities in an open field of the future where bodies do something beside engage the melancholic.

In eight case-study analyses, Lepecki deploys divergent conceptual frames. A chapter “Masculinity, Solipsism, Choreography: Bruce Nauman, Juan Dominguez, Xavier Le Roy” explores white male creativity in terms of haunting and the “idiot,” defined by Lepecki as “the isolated, self-contained one fantasizing subjectivity as an autonomously self-moving being” (33). In critiquing idiotic solipsism within the work of these artists, Lepecki reifies it as a valuable source of inspiration for contemporary choreographies: “Through the particular kind of intensely formless solipsism performed by Le Roy the dismantling of modernity’s idiotic body and its replacement by a relational body renews choreography as practice for political potentiality” (44). But as we all choreograph our daily encounters in the era of George W. Bush, who is surely a prime contemporary exponent of masculinist white solipsism, the possibilities for enabling political potentiality through considerations of dance theatre seem detached, ironic, and flaccid.

A chapter on works by Jérôme Bel claims that “paronomastic movement”—choreographed stillness or slowness intensified through repetition—“dissolves the temporal tyranny modernity’s being-toward-movement imposes on subjectivity for it to be constantly on time” (63). Here, and often throughout the book, arguments that might apply to a particular performance are written as if to be of universal insight. Surely “slowness” functions contingently within performance, as any devotee of *butoh* might confirm, but all *butoh* is not equivalently useful in dissolving temporal tyrannies. A mightily overwritten chapter on the gallery performances of Trisha Brown and La Ribot trades in excessively dense poststructuralist jargon, even as it effectively ghettoizes the women as fodder for the theorization of space and especially the “toppling of plane” to “allow for nonphallogocentric [...] spatialities and noncolonialist territorializations” (68). While Lepecki intends to argue from a feminist perspective, he does not explain how this chapter coheres beyond the fact of his having seen these performances, and then considered ways in which these women choreograph space. How do these artists or these particular performances choreograph race, or ability, location or class, gender, velocity, status, age, desire, or family memory? None of these prisms feed Lepecki’s ruminations on the horizontal; thus, they do not appear here. Ultimately, Lepecki considers dance performance

---

2. Lepecki built this project around performances he attended in Berlin, Lisbon, London, New York, Paris, and Philadelphia. While Lepecki wonders aloud at the significance of work “whose spectatorship will always be limited to the few attending European international dance festivals” (112), the volume constructs its hypotheses from these events and effectively limits experiential responses to this work to the handful of dance scholars in the United States who attend the international dance festival circuit.

3. Lepecki claims a desire “to address the choreographic outside the proper limits of dance” in order to “create new possibilities for thinking relationships between bodies, subjectivities, politics, and movements” (5) but then looks only to a tiny cohort of European and North American performance artists, each of whom proclaims an affinity with Western philosophical traditions. What might have been produced had Lepecki looked beyond the boundaries of individuated Western theatrical dance, to spaces where choreography is not predicated on separations of performers from audiences? How then could a study of the politics of movement actually inspire politicized responses?

only to the degree that it speaks to his philosophical intentions: the performances act as screens upon which he can project his analyses. This may be the Europeanist sensibility writ large: the theorist's point of view matters more than anything else.

Throughout the volume, Lepecki forces unrelated philosophic lines into direct contact with each other. This technique confounds, most troublingly, in a chapter that unconvincingly pairs Martin Heidegger with Frantz Fanon to contend with the crawling performances of William Pope.L. To assert a usefulness to this move, Lepecki must claim that he intends to "agitate the ground of critical theory," to discover "an ontopolitical ground that is not stable or flat, but ceaselessly quivering and grooving" (88). At the end of this chapter, I remained unconvinced that Heidegger helped render Fanon or the significance of Pope.L's crawls as black art offered up by "The Friendliest Black Artist in America." Instead, I wondered at the politics of citation that allow some contemporary theorists to poach from any line of argumentation, no matter its historical context, and hope for intellectual revelation.

The strong final chapter, subtitled "Vera Mantero summoning Josephine Baker," refers to Sigmund Freud's conception of "the uncanny" to construct a prescient formulation: "The animation of whiteness by black soul and black motions participates entirely and symmetrically of narratives that equate dance with the uncanny infusion of life in the corpse" (109). In my reading, this possibility is enabled by this section of the text, when (white Brazilian) author Lepecki hits a politically cogent stride in conversations around race, gender, and colonialism: "What we have with Mantero's use of makeup in her blackening of her body is precisely the marking of both whiteness and blackness as forces of tension for the mutual construction of women's identities across the color line—and particularly the construction of a white woman's sexuality as already in dialogue with blackness" (114). Here, musings on loss and rage, colonialist pasts, ghostly knockings, and white melancholia offer the reader productive strategies for responding to performances "in the melancholic field of the European postcolonial" (122). Here, in describing the "claiming of a movement that is not for the eye to behold" (122), Lepecki seems to suggest that we might dance in order to enable political action. Philosophy might lead us back to dance, in the studio, the club, the stage, the street, the ground.

—Thomas F. DeFrantz

## References

- Fancher, Gordon, and Gerald Myers  
1981 *Philosophical Essays on Dance*. Brooklyn: Dance Horizons.
- Foster, Susan, Coleen Dunagan, and Philipa Rothfield, guest eds.  
2005 "Philosophy and Dance." Special issue. *Topoi* 24, 1 (January).
- Fraleigh, Sondra Horton  
1996 *Dance and the Lived Body: A Descriptive Aesthetics*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- 2004 *Dancing Identity: Metaphysics in Motion*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press
- Lepecki, André  
2006 "Mutant Enunciations." Introduction to special section on Dance and Philosophy, guest edited by André Lepecki. *TDR* 50, 4:16–51.
- Sheets-Johnstone, Maxine  
1966 *The Phenomenology of Dance*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Sparshott, Francis  
1988 *Off the Ground: First Steps to a Philosophical Consideration of the Dance*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- 1995 *Measured Pace: Toward a Philosophical Understanding of the Arts of Dance*. Darby, PA: Diane Publishing Company.