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The Choreographer, Dictator or Director?

When I was young, working as a dancer, I remember the process of creating a new work with a choreographer as predominantly dictatorial, whether I was working with a contemporary dance company, a commercial dance ensemble or in a ‘tits and arse’ show. The choreographer demonstrated; we replicated the movement to the best of our ability, and were corrected, concisely and consistently (if not always kindly), until the choreographer was content. The role of the dancer in my world (the late 1970s and the 1980s) was ruled by laws of replication. As dancers we didn’t ‘create’ movement, we presented the work of the choreographer and, at best, were commended (or not) for our ability to ‘interpret’ what we were offered. I can remember only once being asked to come up with something entirely my own. I was working with Don Asker’s Human Veins Dance Theatre in Canberra and Graeme Watson, one of Australia’s great but rarely

lauded choreographers, was creating *True Blue and the Dreamers* (1985). This work was set loosely around an exploration of Australian Anglo culture. The beach, drug taking and scenes in suburbia featured strongly on a set dominated by two large venetian blinds.

On two occasions during the development Graeme asked us to bring something to the choreographic table. 'Go home and return tomorrow with your interpretation of Venus', he told us one night. I returned to the studio the next day with a pillow stuffed under my sarong. Ok, a bit lame—a barefoot and pregnant Venus? On another occasion we were paired off, girl with boy, and Graeme asked us to decide whether we wanted to 'be with' our partner. We then improvised with our private intention in mind. I worked with David O'Neil, and after a short period of improvising, he began to run away from me, eventually settling into a circumnavigation of the studio. I chased him for a while but then gave up, took my sweat towel off the *barre* and began swatting him with it as he passed. The latter made it into *True Blue and the Dreamers*, as did my pregnant Venus. But I was surprised by what Graeme did with my, and others', simple responses to his provocations. The source material in most cases remained recognisable, at least to us, but dramatically transformed in the complicated passage through his process and onto the stage.

It has always amazed me what choreographers do with the material they have. And I have spent a lot of time contributing to, watching and reflecting on, what they do and how they create meaning for and with dancers and their audiences.

This paper is a reverie on that process—the

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relationship between dancers, choreographers and those of us who observe what they do. It offers a view on the state of dance in contemporary Australia, both as a form of performance practice and a way of making a living. It asks questions about what is particular about the way choreographers work, examines a range of ways in which dancers dance, and how shifting trends in the former affect change in the latter (and vice-versa). It considers the relationship between a range of historical assumptions that fuel contemporary opinion and tries to offer an alternate way of looking at where we are, where we might go and how we might get there.

The questions I began with were: What do I complain about? What disturbs and alarms me about dance in contemporary Australia? And, if I ruled the world, what would I change?

There are naturally many ways that I could approach these questions, and more things than those I offer here have caused me to rant and protest. But the issues I have chosen have emerged out of a concern that, as we move into the twenty-first century, the traditional qualities of dance as an art form in Australia are not dismissed as an historical aberration or consumed by contemporary trends.

This paper is grounded within my own fascination with the act and art, the traditions and procedures of dancing and making dance. This fascination has kept me involved and makes me return, time and time again, to watch people move—in darkened halls with flexible seating, in gilded theatres under proscenium arches, in galleries, along the street, at parties, on VHS or DVD. I, like many others, believe that our ways of dancing offer us a particular way of ‘being in the