

Daniel Nagrin: Dancing Agency in the 1960s

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Abstract

In this paper, I examine the 1960s dances of American choreographer and dancer Daniel Nagrin through the lens of agency. Nagrin privileged choreographic content over form. I argue that his specific images are embodied expressions of social and political actions, which anthropologists Jennifer Hornsby and Drid Williams call 'agency'. I ask, "In what ways do Nagrin's choreographic methods of 'doing-acting' affirm agency? And how did Nagrin use agency to display, support, and protest cultural issues of this time?" Unlike his contemporaries, I show how Nagrin's use of specific embodied actions resulted in dances of the human condition that contextually reflected American issues and values during the 1960s. By viewing his dances and tracing patterns that occur in what he calls the "core of X," I assert that Nagrin re-negotiates content as actions/agency. As a result, my analysis challenges and problematizes ideas of what is American dance modernism. As a former student of Nagrin, I rely upon my choreographic studies with him supplemented by his written books. Other sources include videotapes from him of his 1960's dances, professional critiques, and reviews. The body-as-culture theories in which aesthetic, social, and cultural moments are constructed and embodied in the act of performance are useful to probe Nagrin's use of agency-as-action. I adapted post-structural dance analysis models to analyze Nagrin's choreographic methods. As a result, agentic themes emerged such as racism in "Not Me but Him (1965)"; work ethic in "Path (1965)"; and political protest in "Peloponnesian War (1968)".

Introduction

The 1960s solos of American choreographer Daniel Nagrin (1917-2008), often regarded as a minor pioneer of American modern dance (Gruen 1975), are examined as agency. Anthropologists (Hornsby 1980, 2004 and Williams 2004) define agency as embodied expressions (see Franko 1995) of social and political actions. I further define it as social consciousness and ask, "In what ways do Nagrin's choreographic methods of 'doing-acting' affirm agency?"

Nagrin described his unique six-step choreographic methodology, appropriated from acting techniques, as follows:

At the heart of Stanislavski's teachings and Tamiris's development of them lies a creative act which amazingly enough tends to be ignored most of the time by much of the dance profession. It asks the imagination, the heart and the mind of the dancer to build the entire performance around a specific set of images which are linked as if they were a model sentence

having a subject, a predicate and an object with subordinate clauses. The entire process can actually be encapsulated in one sentence: *Who (or what) is doing what to whom (or what) and where, in what context and under what difficulties and why?*

Nagrin 1997:33-34

I like to think of this as ‘someone (or thing) is doing something to someone; where and/or when, what is the obstacle, and why/to what extent.’ As a Master’s of Fine Arts choreography and performance student for three years at Arizona State University during the mid 1980s, I constantly heard Nagrin refer to this six-question process as “getting to the core of X.” This concept of X motivates the creation of his dances and is the crux of his entire opus. I call this “the Nagrin Method” and argue that it is grounded in the notion of human agency through actions. I rely upon my choreographic studies with Nagrin, his books (Nagrin 1994, 1997, and 2001) and videotapes (1967, 1985, and 2004), critiques, and reviews to conduct a contextual analysis.

With the theme of ‘dance actions’ in mind, my framework for analysis is based upon the following theories. Jennifer Hornsby’s “realistic account of human agency” views bodily actions as “exercises” of a person’s will in order to “bring about the things that they actually do” (Hornsby 2004:16, 21). Thus, the choices made are treated as causal power or agent-causation at work when actions are manifest. The agent has the capacity to act deliberately and *intentionally* based on ethics and motivation, and action is defined as “a *person’s* intentionally doing something (2004:19).”

The semasiological theory of Drid Williams contributes further when she states that human actions cannot be independent of the “social settings, intentions, and value systems in which they exist (2004:204).” Like Williams who emphasizes action as inclusive of bodily movements and lived experience, Nagrin defines action as “the inner life that drives what we see on the stage . . . ‘action’ becomes central. It refers to the *verb* that drives the dance and the dancer (Nagrin 2001:44).” These theories are useful as they support my examination of Nagrin’s agency-as-action dances.

My adapted post-structural models of Janet Adshead (1988) and Angela Kane (2003) are drawn upon to analyze Nagrin’s use of agency in his choreography. I will show how Nagrin appropriated Stanislavski’s methods to create agentic dances of the human condition. Agency emerges by tracing patterns that occur in Nagrin’s treatment of subject matter and thematic diversity. I argue that he arrived at his “core of X” through actions, particularly his use of minimal movement and expression. Nagrin re-negotiated these as content rather than form through the agentic actions of socially conscious dances. Unlike his contemporaries (Banes 2003), Nagrin’s use of specific embodied actions resulted in dances of the human condition that contextually reflected American issues and values during the 1960s. I assert that agentic themes emerge such as racism, work ethic, and political protest. Thus, my analysis challenges and problematizes ideas of what constitutes American dance modernism. It also provides insights into a non-formalist approach to choreography and criticism.

Contextualization

The 1960s was a tumultuous decade in America. Many upheavals and meta-revolutions occurred politically, socially, philosophically, and aesthetically which questioned all establishment norms. Pragmatism and the modern-Enlightenment manifesto that positioned man as possessing all the answers were destroyed after the first atomic bomb dropped in 1945 (Appleby et al 1994). The American mindset of the 1950s was dominated by McCarthy's fear of communism, the launching of Russia's Sputnik that placed the first man in space, and threat of nuclear holocaust (Kane 2000 and Manning 1988). During the 1960s, traditional foundations of American culture were shaken and challenged by Kennedy's New Era liberal social policies, various life-style experimentations (Banes 2003), women's and civil rights protests, cities burning due to unrest and riots, assassinations, and the divisive Vietnam conflict which was never declared a war. Since the contextual relationship between art and the cultural times is complex and possibly reflective (Adshead 1988 and 2007; Desmond 1997; and Williams 2004), it is plausible to assume that dance was experiencing a shift as well. Modern dance experienced its own cultural revolution through the application of such devices as audience engagement, defamiliarization, and the celebration of the everyday that blurred art and life (Banes 2003 and in Docherty 1999). Although Gus Solomons (1998:6) suggested that Nagrin was "influenced by the experiments of the avant-garde Judson Church group," this is suspect as personal information from Nagrin whilst a graduate student indicated otherwise. Nagrin worked with neither the Judsons nor Robert Dunn, teacher of composition classes during the 1950s and early 1960s that were attended by those later known as the Judson group. However, it is reasonable to assume that Nagrin possessed "a continual awareness of the contemporary world" (Schlundt in Cohen [ed] 1998:530-31) and changing times that were reflected throughout his works.

Nagrin's solos during this decade include his *Spring* (1965) concert tour featuring *A Gratitude* (1964), *In The Dusk* (1965), *Why Not?* (1965), and *National Dance I & II* (1965). Other dances are *Nineteen Upbeats* (1965), *Not Me, But Him* (1965), *Path* (1965), and *Peloponnesian War* (1968). Since Nagrin's first two questions are 'who are you' and 'what are you doing,' how movements are treated reveals further how he defined the core of X. Due to limitations on the length of this article and since the conference theme centres on dance actions, I will focus on these two questions of his six-step method.

Minimal Movement

Nagrin used minimal movements to further define and clarify his 'X,' or 'what X is doing,' which merits closer examination. Sally Banes (2003) asserts that art in the 1960s was minimalistic. Several critics such as Carbonneau (1995), Guest (1967), Jackson (1965), Michelotti (1996), Solomons (1998), and Vaughan (1975) commented on the minimalist movement characteristics within Nagrin's works during this time. These actions are marked by stripped-down, pedestrian movements seen for the first time in his experiments with performance art works such as *Peloponnesian War* and minimal, task-like works such as *Path*. The extent to which this minimalistic movement vocabulary is



Path by Daniel Nagrin, photographer unknown. Used with permission from the Daniel Nagrin Foundation Theatre, Film, & Dance Foundation, Library of Congress collection.

consistent with or differed from the 1960s dancers is examined. With minor exceptions, his movement contrasts with the physically virtuosic feats of his earlier Dance Portraits.

From viewing the concert videotape and DVD (Nagrin 1985 and 2004), *Spring '65* consists of several new works and some revivals. Several of these dances and even the spaces between them contain elements that further define the character of X. For example, movement minimalism emerges through a seamless flow of various commonplace actions and functions both between and within the dances. Stanislavski (1936:33) said all of the actions that “happen on stage must be for a purpose,” as no action or movement from the performer is unintentional. Taking this agentic notion into Nagrin’s works with the assumption that he is working from Stanislavski’s ideas, his core of X, therefore, is revealed in the intention of doing. Doing is seen through stillness, gestures and other non-weight-bearing movements, and pedestrian and task-like movements. Character-defining actions are evident in natural walking, operating the tape recorder, lighting a cigarette, drinking water, sitting down, changing and tying shoes, and wiping his face with a towel before the next dance begins.

In viewing *Why Not* (1965), some of X’s doing-actions are playing what appears to be an American street game called craps. Nagrin’s X throws imaginary dice by thrusting the arm outward and ecstatically snapping the fingers, hand slapping the rhythm, and foot

stamping. *In the Dusk's* movements contain statuesque poses and various uncoded arm movements sans torso. Between *National Dance* and *Not Me, But Him*, Nagrin performs some non-codified hand and arm gestures that flowed into the next dance. In the latter, some reviewers considered his movements to be effortless (Jackson 1965 and Marks 1965) and exciting, holding an audience's attention (Guest 1967). From the videotape, Nagrin begins with a pose, his back to the audience with right hand pointing a finger in the air. According to written accounts, *Nineteen Upbeats* used "common movement" (Osolin cited in Schlundt 1997:44) and gestures such as everyday grooming (Guest 1967). However, the specific intentions behind the actions are unknown since various correspondences with Nagrin (2005) proved unfruitful. This is not surprising from my experience with him regarding intention and reception. In *Peloponnesian War*, he changes clothes several times to reveal different characters, takes a bath, performs another morning



Peloponnesian War by Daniel Nagrin, photographer unknown. Used with permission from the Daniel Nagrin Foundation Theatre, Film, & Dance Foundation, Library of Congress collection.

routine of waking and dressing, arm-wrestles with a disembodied hand, sleeps, and smokes (Fortney 1968 and Schlundt 1997). Nagrin's random, pedestrian walks can be seen as similar to the art-for-art's-sake works of Yvonne Rainer, Lucinda Childs, and Kenneth King during this time. However, the difference is that Nagrin's actions are based in content with the intent of revealing the 'X.'

From viewing the videotape of *Spring '65*, these interjections of physical virtuosity and stamina appear which contrast with minimalism that further defines both the X and his actions. For example, the cartwheels and a double *tour en l'air* in *A Gratitude* contrast with tender and slow movements to define an exuberant character. *Why Not* employs a fast, uncoded spin. The first section of *National Dance* later included in *Peloponnesian War* uses steps from Eastern European traditional dances. These consist of a fast grapevine, then Ukrainian men's *bleking* hops that end in a small *plié* on one leg with the other leg stretched out to the side and heel touching the floor, and finishing with large jumps from a deep *grand plié* as seen in Russian men's folk dances. Nagrin's parody of a jazzy Broadway style with frenzied spins, kicks, leaps, and a wide, plastic smile are seen in *Not Me, But Him* and *National Dance II* from *Peloponnesian War*. In contrast are the slow, smooth qualities of *In the Dusk*'s aerial jumps and leaps.

Nagrin's continual popular culture display of the ordinary and every day movements reveals the character. This use of agency blurs the boundaries between real life and art. This is similar to Stanislavski's (1924:49) Realism focus, particularly in directing Chekhov's plays in which the common and ordinary in the world around him were used. The vernacular and pop art were emphasized by many 1960s artists who would "fling anything which is 'read' in front of us and call it 'art'" (Reid 1969:125). Examples are Andy Warhol's Brillo pad box and his multiple neon portraits of Hollywood icon Marilyn Monroe (Banes, 2003). In general, art at this time could be anything that was displayed through the

use of ordinary gestures, actions, rhythms, and . . . household objects [incorporated] into their paintings and performances . . . blurring the boundaries between art and every day life, [an] arrant celebration of the banal . . . a shocking . . . fascination with the mundane.

Banes 2003:3

Nagrin did just that with his minimalist and quotidian dance actions to produce agency.

Expression

Nagrin further reveals his X through bodily expression via actions. Stanislavski (1936:43) taught that all on-stage "action must have an inner justification" rather than developing it from contrived emotions which produces "false acting." He achieved this through inner psychological work to evoke inspiration, then the outer work through embodiment, or the "I am" (1961:27). In all his concert works, Nagrin never resorted to dancing an emotion in a literal sense; but expression (Franko 1995) is inherent in a strong image of either who or what he was through the function or action, or his X. The complexity of expression, which is a disputed concept, is defined as the pressing outward of water from a sponge, but yet the same water is contained within the sponge (Best 1974 and Reid 1969). Mark Franko (1995:ix) states that expression (*Ausdruck*) is the inner pressed out through force, the "outwarding of inwardness" stimulated by the experience of emotion. He extends this to dance and distinguishes between "expressive" that is outward and contains subjectivism or emotion; and "expression" which is inward and privileges the moving body's presence

rather than the expressive pursuing of an emotion. The latter is a key characteristic of modernism (1995:6). Expressiveness in dance is not the emotional expression of choreographers, dancers, or spectators but of certain characteristics emergent in the bodily movement that is three-fold: stimulus, feeling impact, and expression (1995:x). For example, a work does not symbolize sadness but is, in itself, sad (McFee 1992). This notion is similar to Isadora Duncan's use (Layson 1987) and to what Martha Graham did in *Frontier* (Franko 1995). The looking outward transformed her, and the audience saw and believed what she saw (Nagrin 2001). The movement itself possesses emotive qualities within Nagrin's dances to define the core of X. For instance, Nagrin's X embodies happiness in *A Gratitude* and Eastern European essences in *National Dances* through very lively, uplifting dances. Nagrin worked through the action rather than emotion to create movement. He writes:

the action produces the emotion. Stanislavski says, never work for or from the emotion; only work from the specific action and the emotion will follow . . . Where I work from, indeterminacy and uncertainty prevail and answers are few.

Nagrin 2001:103

It is clear from the above quote that Nagrin works from expression rather than working from an emotion, which is consistent with my experience with him. He embraces Stanislavski's (1924/48, 1936/59, and 1961) concept of expression through embodied action to find the core of X. This idea contrasts with abstract expressionist painters' uses of the moving body in which emotion is separated from content and intent (Franko 1995 and Copeland 2004). Nagrin's expression includes the notion of content/function; that is, ideas, feelings, images, or experiences achieved through a specific image. Since these feelings cannot exist without content, a "something," such as the specific image of a personal, felt experience (Reid 1969:46) is needed, which is Stanislavski's (1924) focus. This is evident in Edgar Allan Poe's and T.S. Eliot's works which denied expression that "involves emotion" (Reid 1969:77). Nagrin's content through embodied expression is seen in the angry movement sarcasm in *Peloponnesian War* that projects his adversity for the Vietnam conflict; through the removal of a black-faced mask in *Not Me, but Him* to reveal whiteness, problematizing racism; and through the repetitive pacing in *Path*, which pays tribute to the hard-working ethic of construction crews. Nagrin's allowing the body to speak through movement and content contrasts with the "classical expression theory" (Sirridge and Armelagos 1977:15) that projects an emotion by the dancer (Martin 1939 and 1975). For example, emotion is evident in one of two phases of Martha Graham's dances, distinguished as materialist and dramaturgical rather than the previously attributed Americana/Mythology category (Franko 1995).

Summary and Conclusion

In his 1960's solos, Nagrin's dance actions through treatment of subject matter feature the framing of content through minimal movement and expression. Nagrin chose diverse themes that feature task-like work and human agency, but with immediacy. His six-step

method of getting to the core of X is clear. I have argued that Hornsby's (2004:23) articulation of agent-causation with its "realistic account of human agency" is seen in these dances. These works involve an action-oriented, motive-based, observational analysis of a specific character addressing relevant social issues and offering conflicting results. I have called this the "The Nagrin Method." Within his six-step compositional model, Nagrin's dances at this time are based in his 'X' or specific characters [agents], and his 'core' is found from the intentional *doing* of specific tasks or functions [actions] with effects [causes]. Nagrin's choices of actions-as-agency are "exercises of [his] capacities" (2004:23) to bring about both reflexivity and change.

My analysis aims to illuminate Nagrin's conception of the dancing body and his methods through the lens of agency. He asserts human agency in two ways: by creating social critiques based on actions, and by using social themes as content. These compelling dances based on social critiques demonstrate a progressive fusion of what it meant to be American at that time for him. Unlike most of his contemporaries, Nagrin privileged content over form and themes from popular culture, embracing these ideas through agency. It is remarkable how closely Nagrin's works mirror the socio-political landscape. This distinguished him from his contemporaries.

The Nagrin Method provides a new way to create dances which positions Nagrin within a separate strand of modernism, one that differs significantly from that adhered to by other choreographers. Nagrin's method provides an alternative critical lens through which we can analyze, read, and narrate the genre of American modern dance differently. His use of agency through action and content, among other factors, is part of a larger legacy but also a strand of modernism that merits a re-visiting of historical strategies and analytical modes of choreographic processes. It suggests the need for both a deeper examination of extant critical and historical writings and a more thorough critical analyses of concert works.

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