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Citation MLA Style:

Wawrejko, Diane, Daniel Nagrin's Dance Portraits: Choreographing Agency. Journal for the Anthropological Study of Human Movement 19.1 (2012): 56 pars. 13 Dec. 2012
<<http://jashm.press.illinois.edu/19.1/wawrejko.html>>.

Daniel Nagrin's Dance Portraits: Choreographing Agency

Diane Wawrejko

Overview

This paper examines American choreographer and dancer Daniel Nagrin's use of specific images and actions to privilege choreographic content over form. I ask, "In what ways do Nagrin's background, his choreographic methods of 'doing-acting,' and his dancing body affirm Jennifer Hornsby's notion of the subject as 'agent-causation' (1980 and 2004)?" I show how Nagrin's selection of iconic American characters in specific situations, juxtaposed with his cause-and-effect choreographic structures, resulted in dance portraits of the human condition that reflected American values at that time. By tracing patterns that occur in Nagrin's arrival at what he calls the "core of X," I argue that he renegotiates choreographic content as compelling social critique and that this departure from the formalist approaches to American modern dance subsequently contributed to his marginalization. As a result of my analysis, I challenge and problematize ideas of what constitutes American dance modernism. As a former student of Nagrin's, I rely on my choreographic studies with him, supplemented by his written texts (Nagrin 1988, 1994, 1997, and 2001). Other sources of analytic data and historical context include his videotapes, professional critiques, and reviews. I adapt the poststructural models offered by Janet Adshead et al. (1988) and Angela Kane (2003) to analyze Nagrin's choreographic methods. A representative case study of one of his most famous works, *Strange Hero* (1948), is included at the end to elucidate further Nagrin's use of agency in his work.

Introduction

American choreographer and dancer Daniel Nagrin (1917–2008) is often regarded as a minor pioneer of American modern dance (Gruen 1975). He described his unique six-step choreographic methodology as follows:

At the heart of Stanislavski's teachings and Tamiris's [sic] 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)

As a Master's of Fine Arts choreography and performance student for three years under Nagrin at Arizona State University during the mid 1980s, I constantly heard him 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 works. I call this "the Nagrin Method" and argue that it is grounded in the notion of human agency. I discuss Nagrin's use of agency (through actions) and the extent to which this distanced Nagrin from his contemporaries.

Context

Just as Nagrin deemed important his character's contexts, defining a choreographer's context helps us to understand his dances. Nagrin was married to and danced with modern dance pioneer Helen Tamiris; both were natives of New York City whose Russian-Jewish parents fled the pogroms. He performed and choreographed for over five decades from the late 1930s to the late 1980s. These years and the location are significant, not only for American dance history but also because of the societal changes that occurred at that time within the larger cultural framework of modernism (Banes 1987, 1994; Schlundt 1997). Nagrin worked within and overlapped various genres throughout his career, fusing acting techniques with modern dance, jazz dance, Broadway, film, and improvisation. His crossing of these genres in this time and place significantly shaped his choreographic and performance styles, using human agency as both a theme and a method. I believe that Nagrin's Jewishness and his social milieu while living and working in New York City in the mid-twentieth century shaped his desire to create dances about the human social condition.

Several key individuals in the American modern dance movement in the 1920s and 1930s were Jewish, such as Helen Tamiris, Irene Lewisohn, Esther Junger, Benjamin Zemach, Anna Sokolow, and Sophie Maslow. These dancers, like Nagrin, were children of Eastern European Jewish working-class immigrants (Jackson 2000: 15). The New York brand of Jewishness embraced a Marxist ideology that can be traced to the status of Jewish workers in czarist Russia during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Scholars have suggested that their humanism was a dual reaction to impoverishment, oppression, pogroms, and mass unemployment that produced a need for altruism (Smithsonian Institution 2004; Goldberg 1988; Jackson 2000). In America, Jewish immigrants were joined by the common bonds of community, socialism, nonreligion, and a Protestant working-class social structure that was a particularly important theme during the 1930s Great Depression. It was in this context that many of these Jewish immigrants embraced the arts, modernism, and the dance (Copeland 2004; Greenberg 1955; Jackson 2000). Overall, they were intellectual, artistic, socially conscious, and humanistic. That they were sensitive to the Jewish experience was evident in their art, ideology, and values. They largely embraced collective Marxist ideals (Franko 1995; Jackson 2000; Perelman 2004). From personal communication and from his writings (1989 and 2001), I know that Nagrin also embraced existentialism, which is rooted in Marxism.

The underpinning aesthetic ethos that fueled the merging of a Jewish identity and desire for assimilation was the socialist notion of shaping a new American culture through art. The nineteenth-century belief in Hegel's view of history-as-progress was replaced by the Nietzschean concept (based in Kantian philosophy) that an aesthetic, artistic ideal was the solution. This position privileged "Dionysian Being" over "Apollonian Thinking,"¹ so that experience and expression were viewed as important critiques of reason and scientific objectivity (see Habermas 1999). Art was thought to have an ameliorative function, capable of causing reflection on one's own experiences and ideals to convey both the mood and structure of experience or emotion for the purpose of improving society, maintaining order, and producing solidarity (Sparshott 1970). This fitted well with Leo Tolstoy's Marxism, which regarded art as a useful unifying function through the communication of feelings, but this view contrasted with the then-current minimalist, Apollonian modernist narrative. For the most part, Eastern European Jewish immigrants and dancers in New York embraced the ideals of both Nietzsche and Marx. Sparshott (1970) asserts that, in a society that values the human condition, as did these Jewish immigrants and their children, including Nagrin, the greatest value will be placed on artistic works that embody those feelings and ideas. Thus, morality and society can be intertwined, and art can contribute by endorsing, supporting, or opposing them. This notion is useful to investigate further Nagrin's use of dancing as inherently agentic.

My framework for describing Nagrin's actions as a conscious use of human agency is built on the following theories. Jennifer Hornsby's "realistic account of human agency" views bodily actions as a person's "exercises" of the 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).

Drid Williams's semasiological theory 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). Likewise, Rom Harré's notion of agency is intertwined with identity as a *social* construct—the agent is in control of decisions and actions, and human interaction is the "primary human reality [of] persons in conversation" (1984: 58). An agent has "drives, motivations, intentions, and desires" that are coupled with beliefs; but intention is an *outcome* of action [not a precondition] (ibid., 29). In alignment with this social psychological approach, but, like Williams, emphasizing 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).

Portraits of the Human Condition

From his original concert programs of the 1940s–50s, we know that Nagrin titled his early works "Dance Portraits." These featured socially constructed characters in action who displayed aspects of the human social condition. Considered a "great dancing personality" of the 1950s (Siegel 1977: 237), Nagrin shaped and translated into movement specific complex characters who were prevalent and believable in American society at that time. From viewing videotapes (Nagrin 1967, 1985, 2004b) and various writings, I conclude that the crux of Nagrin's solos, or his "X," are personalities defined through specific actions. These solo portraits of active social subjects were his first attempts at choreography, and they contrasted with the group characters and themes of modern dance choreographers such as Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, and José Limón. These solo portraits include the club-dancing, cola-drinking soldier in *Private Johnny Jukebox* (1942) and *Landscape with Three Figures, 1859* (1943), based on John Brown's 1859 raid on Harper's Ferry that catapulted America into civil war (Concert Programs, 1951). Also important are an exuberant autumn walk in *Dance in the Sun* (1951), the good-looking, cigarette-smoking gangster on the run in *Strange Hero* (1948), and the busy businessman in *Man of Action* (1948).

In contrast to his contemporaries, who were concerned with manipulating form and embracing Apollonian themes rather than the world around them, Nagrin's dances offered a social critique of American society. His idiosyncratic characters were at the center, constructed from his observations and interactions with real people, from his own worldview and the world around him (Schlundt 1997). For example, he exposed fears of nuclear annihilation in *Indeterminate Figure* (1957), which Louis Horst described as a "bitter social comment" that condemned the present generation (Horst 1957a: 103). Drawing from his personal experiences, Nagrin explained how he obtained the idea for *Man of Action*:

Tamiris and I lived in Croton-on-Hudson from 1948 to 1950, which meant that we spent a lot of time in Grand Central [subway station], going and coming. One day we were on that elevated section on the west side of the station looking down at a late afternoon crowd criss-crossing the enormous space. My eye was caught by a man moving faster than anyone there. Suddenly he changed direction, without losing a beat and then just as abruptly he changed back to his original direction, but before long he was headed in an entirely new direction. I laughed and knew that he had given me a new dance. (Nagrin cited in Schlundt 1997: 212)

Nagrin's solos are "about the human condition [which] still resonates today" (O'Hara 2005). Schlundt explains that Nagrin "dealt with the plight of people in this world" and his focus was "always human beings and their relationships with their environment" (1997: 70). His social motivation contrasted with the Greek and Jungian psychological motivation of Graham's expressionist works, based on inner thoughts and feelings expressed through movement (Franko 1995). From my work under Nagrin's tutelage, I can affirm that an enduring interest in portraying human agency as action motivated his dances and was his *raison d'être*.

The extent to which Nagrin's social consciousness emerges through the deliberate actions of characters reflecting the human condition is central to understanding his work. Nagrin "explores, values, and makes accessible what it means to be human" (Evans 2002: 58) by provoking "audiences to share and ponder" (Schlundt 1998: 531). Rather than dance someone else's choreography (as on Broadway), Nagrin wanted "to be an artist who demanded straight out that people look at their lives and think about

their values" (Schlundt 1997: 62). He accomplished this by confronting viewers with dramatic, conflicted characters, prompting them to acknowledge personal biases and to reflect on relevant, current social issues (Evans 2002).

For the most part, the "Big Four"² modern dance choreographers—Graham, Holm, Humphrey, and Weidman—avoided working with these grittier aspects of contemporary life in lieu of more formalist, psychological, and/or Apollonian ideals. In contrast, Nagrin's use of these multicultural agentic portraits placed the reader/viewer firmly in the current historical moment. For example, in a time of overwhelming Euro-American cultural hegemony in the U.S., Nagrin's "Dance Portraits" confronted racism by privileging Latino heritage in *Spanish Dance* (1948), African American inspired dances and music in *Jazz Three Ways* (1957), and Southeast Asian island culture in *With My Eye and With My Hand* (1957). Nagrin's specific characters embodied a critique of society that confirms Hornsby's concept of agent/causation: here we see persons as agents doing something [action] that bring(s) about "the things that they actually do [cause]" (Hornsby 2004: 16; these ideas are also in Hornsby 1980).

Content and the Specific Image

Another prominent feature in finding the "core of X" is Nagrin's approach to choreography during this period. Unlike his contemporaries, he privileged subject matter as content rather than form. This choreographic structuring further articulates his attention to agency.

From my experience working with Nagrin's videos and methods, I can say that his movement responses stem from the character's motivations and are discovered or found (not made) through analyzing each character and focusing on content or essence rather than working from emotion or form: "I try not to make up movement. I try to find it. I find it out of what happens" (Nagrin 2001: 35). In other words, the content justifies the action. Martin referred to this intrinsic motivation based within internal content to define character as "motor characterization" (cited in Schlundt 1997: 30). Nagrin (2001) called it "heart/mind" which is at the core of the actions of X. In other words, he discovered his choreographic content through the social actions of specific characters, rather than making dances by manipulating formal elements or privileging the psyche.

Aesthetics philosophers Sheldon Cheney (1946) and Louis Arnaud Reid (1969: 80) state that art consists of two strands, "the discovery and construction of form," which are finding and making, respectively. Accordingly, we can say that Nagrin is a 'dancefinder,' not a 'dancemaker,' since he created his dances through the act of discovering motivations and resultant actions rather than using expressionist ways of constructing dances by manipulating form.

Nagrin's nonformalist, nonexpressionist method was not popular at the time and was in direct contrast to the form-based works of his contemporaries. Rather than allowing current social content and actions surrounding the "core of X" to shape the dance as Nagrin did, for the most part the formalist expressionist choreographers such as Graham and Humphrey manipulated the elements of space, floor pattern, body shape, texture, rhythm, and dynamics to convey or express an inner psychological theme or quality through movement.

Nagrin believed that 'X' is found through the content of a specific character doing a specific action for a specific purpose (Meglin 1999; Nagrin 1994, 1997, 2001; Schlundt 1997, 1998; Tamiris 1989). It is important to emphasize that Nagrin asserts that a certain character (his X), *does* something (Roses-Thema 2003); thus, his "doing-acting" approach assigns a specific kind of agency to any character (Schlundt 1997: 2; Meglin 1999: 105). In an informal telephone interview with Nagrin in 2004, he summed it up as a "doing approach through movement/dance based in acting techniques" that can only come from an internal place through an in-depth analysis of a character's function/action, or agency (2004a). This differs from pantomime and gesturing as an in-depth character analysis appropriated from acting theory that weaves character, intentions, and emotions into deliberate social action. From the choreography and improvisation classes I have taken from Nagrin, I know he consistently stressed the specific image and

specific doing, the "who are you?" and "what are you doing?" above everything else and any other element or process.

In sum, Nagrin's use of agency does (and did) not fit with modern dance's aesthetic guidelines of elevating the empirical, external structures of form standardised by Graham, Holm, Horst, Humphrey, or Laban. Instead, he placed primary importance on expressing internal elements of the human condition (Dunning 1982; O'Hara 2005; Schlundt 1997) with content and function as the core of X's identity. Nagrin's privileging of agentic content and function over form was a maverick approach to modern dance at that time. It is *the* defining principle that shapes and distinguishes Nagrin's choreographic method and style during this period and underpins the work of his entire life. To search for the intrinsic function or content—rather than external form, or develop movement from an emotion or psyche, or for art's sake, or from personal style and preferences—is key.

This process is the antithesis of emoting, but not in the romantic sense; and, unlike Graham, Nagrin rarely based his work in emotional or psychological content or in expressive emoting to find movement (Franko 1995). For Nagrin, structural elements remain important as these provide the framework to shape a dance, but the heart of a work is in the content (Hutcheon 1988; Jenkins 1991, 2001). Content provides a means to meaningful reflection by artist and viewer alike and, in its poststructural sense, can be applied to the 'abstract'³ or plotless, movement-for-movement's sake dances of Cunningham and Balanchine in which the movement and/or chance procedures *are* the content (Copeland 2004; Macaulay 1986). However, having studied both Graham and Cunningham techniques for many years from company members and having performed in their works, I find that Nagrin's (1994) approach is quite different: he used content as meaningful reflection to create social portraits that portray aspects of human agency.

Although several dance writers and critics recognized Nagrin's emphasis on content over form (for example, Carbonneau 1995; Cohen 1960; Hutchinson Guest 1967), they did not always agree. For example, *Dance Magazine* critic Doris Hering, on seeing Nagrin's first full solo concert, completely dismissed the content-driven intent of many of his dances as nothing more than the "eternal" problem of the relationship "between form and content" (Hering 1958: 83). In contrast, the *Dance Encyclopedia* editor P. W. Manchester (1953, 1957a and b; 1959a, b, c, d) and Louis Horst, musical composer, editor of *Dance Observer*, and a teacher of dance composition who was also Graham's mentor, remained steadfast in recognizing the merit of Nagrin's works his attention to content notwithstanding (1957a, 1957b, 1958, 1959). The penchant for privileging form at the time is evident from Hering's criticisms (1951, 1958), whereas others such as Manchester remained more amenable to content. Clearly, the hagiographical nature of critical writing during this time needs to be examined further.

We can position Nagrin within a separate strand of modernism, one that differed significantly from that adhered to by formalist critics and choreographers. These differences are important when considering Nagrin's place in the history of American modern dance, since it was the critics and other writers who constructed the prevailing view of modern dance based in formalism (Jackson 2000; Kane 2002).

Marginalization

Research reveals that writers and critics had four plausible reasons for marginalizing Nagrin's work. The first was his association with Tamiris and her social activism. Second, he used Stanislavski's theater techniques rather than Horst's choreographic principles that were grounded in musical form. Third, his Broadway career, use of jazz music and dance, and popular cultural and agentic themes were seen as problematic. Fourth, as mentioned above, some critics simply rejected his artistic choice to privilege content over form. These key factors not only distinguish Nagrin but also account for his marginalization in the accepted canon of American modern dance history.

First, Nagrin, as Tamiris' husband, was associated with her controversial social activism. Some historians have inadvertently linked Tamiris with the leftist revolutionary dance movement since she addressed the plight of the underprivileged, but this is now questionable (Manning 2004a; Prickett 1994a,

b; Schlundt 1972). During the 1930s, she developed several dance organizations such as the Arts Project for the Federal Theatre of the Works Progress Administration (Tamiris 1989[1928]) in an attempt to organize modern dancers into a collective voice. This was perceived by critic Paul Douglas (in Franko 1995) as too closely linked to the socialist practice of forming large groups as a collective voice. Additionally, the Communist Party supported some of the other dance organizations at this time. These were later dismantled by a forerunner of Senator Joseph McCarthy's Un-American Activities Committee (Manning 2004b). By this time, some considered Tamiris "red," and she was placed on the government's "Red Listing" of dancers during the 1930s (Manning 2004a). Ironically, however, revolutionary critics such as Edna Ocko (Prickett 1994b) criticized Tamiris because she would *not* use movement as propaganda, as did revolutionary dancers in the United States such as Anna Sokolow and Sophie Maslow (Banes 1994; Harris 1996) and arguably Rudolf Laban and Mary Wigman in Nazi Germany.

Like Isadora Duncan, Tamiris refused to adopt capitalist-based bourgeois dance forms in lieu of addressing the working proletariat (Franko 1995, 2002). However, Graff (1994), Prickett (1994a: 16) and Schlundt (1997) agree that Tamiris was not in fact leftist, as her ideal for a dance aesthetic actually *collides* with socialism; additionally, it displaced modernist formalism, like Nagrin's work (Franko 1995). Jackson's (2000) omission of both Tamiris and Nagrin in her examination of the leftist elements in American modern dance implicitly corroborates this. On reviewing the literature, I have discovered that critics such as John Martin, Louis Horst, Edwin Denby and others eschewed the leftist revolutionaries, systematically omitting these artists and their works from their books and reviews during the 1930s–40s.⁴ A similar attitude and ideology are found in the work of dance critic and historian Sally Banes, who divides the modern dancers of this time into two groups—the noble "progressive liberals" such as Graham and Humphrey and the derogatorily labeled "radical," "leftist" revolutionaries such as Sokolow and Maslow (Banes 1994: 203).

Louis Horst, author of the well-known and widely used choreographic primer in the United States *Pre-Classical Dance Forms* (1937), helped shape American modern dance of the 1920–40s through his writings and dance composition classes that applied musical structures to choreographic form. He founded the publication *Dance Observer* in an effort to establish American modern dance as an art form (Schlundt 1997). However, a critical reading of his writing reveals that Horst selectively included reviews of dances and dance concerts that used formalism and excluded those that did not. He favored the works and ideals of Graham, Humphrey, and Weidman who mirrored his own formalist, traditionalist principles (Kane 2002) and the works of Wigman and Holm who used Laban's approach to form and dynamics (Laban 1971 [1950]). Reference to alternative approaches such as Nagrin's were markedly absent from his writings. Likewise, dance critic John Martin (1939, 1975) privileged the structural theories based in musical form taught by Horst and promoted choreographers who used them. As the dance critic for the *New York Times* from 1927 to his death in 1962, Martin "shaped dancers' careers as well as the public's perception of dance" (Jackson 2000: 57).

Martin and Horst were powerful advocates and critics. They constructed a historical picture of American modern dance as formalist in two ways: politically, through their journalistic visibility and power; and aesthetically, through their avocation as formalist critics. Martin, for example, recommended that the Big Four dancers establish dance programs at the YMHA and Bennington summer dance workshops (Siegel 1987). The Bennington workshops eventually inspired the formation of American college and university dance programs that, even today, overwhelmingly utilize Horst's writings and the works of Graham, Humphrey, Cunningham, and Laban. Martin's selective choices shaped not only modern dance itself but also American dance history. His choices were positioned to exclude nonformalist, nonexpressionist choreographers such as Tamiris and Nagrin.⁵ In addition, Nagrin's appropriation of Russian theater director Constantin Stanislavski's six-step acting method really put him at odds with these powerful formalist writers and dance critics.

The third reason for being excluded from the canon was Nagrin's theatrical embrace of popular culture, Broadway, and African American jazz music and dance. Positioned as socially relevant "proletariat art," such popular forms were seen as conflicting with the "bourgeois" art of the Big Four (Franko 1995: 27).⁶ Nagrin's work on Broadway was considered "low brow" and lacking a recognizable

dance technique comparable to Graham's or Humphrey's (Franko 1995). In telling contrast, the ballet-trained Jerome Robbins was treated favorably as a Broadway choreographer during the 1940s (Jowitt 2004).

Most dance critics did not treat jazz dance with seriousness or respect (Roses-Thema 2003). Nagrin was just as passionate as Tamiris about an American dance form using jazz and African American themes (Nagrin 1989; Tamiris 1989 [1928]). However, African American-based music and dancing were not being explored by most of their formalist contemporaries, possibly due to xenophobia but also because of the conflict between high and low, bourgeois and proletariat, and black and white art at the time.

As a dance critic, Martin regarded the Big Four as elite dance artists, and he ignored the vital expressions of agency located within the themes of nation, class, race, and gender found in the more socialist roots of alternative forms of American modern dance. We can now recognize a double standard existing among critics at the time, since any ethnic and racial dimensions presented in the dances of the Four were acknowledged. At the same time, critics tended to demean or dismiss dance artists who *were* Jewish, African American, or Latino. Manning argues that critics such as Martin and Walter Terry of the *New York Times* only accepted black concert dance when it was staged on an Euro-American white body, such as Tamiris' embodiment of black themes, which Manning labels "metaphorical minstrelsy" (Manning 2004a: 10; 2004b).

Nagrin's use of multicultural characters was both "convincing" and egalitarian, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or social class (McDonagh 1970: 79). Inspiration came from his culturally diverse reality that thematically shaped and directed his characters within this cluster of dances. Nagrin appropriated the unpopular notion of Africanisms into his Dance Portraits. These included featuring jazz music and dance; polycentrism and polyrhythms (whereby different body parts do different movements and rhythms simultaneously); emphasis on the 'cool' or "*dwo*" (Jonas 1992) seen in the cigarette-smoking gangster in *Strange Hero* (1948) and the oblivious narcissist in *Indeterminate Figure* (1957); and improvisation (Dixon Gottschild 1995; Welsh Asante 2001).

Once again, Nagrin's artistic choices contrasted with the "aesthetic modernist narratives" that omitted attention to politics and mass culture (Franko 1995: ix). Nagrin transcended these barriers because both his dances and dancing body defied labels. They were neither 'black' nor 'white' nor 'Jewish,' but a cultural fusion that was 'American.' His performance style and dancing body, in fact, created a new aesthetic through fusing the genres of modern and jazz dance.

Re-Thinking Dance Modernism

The decade of the 1950s commenced with McCarthy's campaign to purge America of artists and intellectuals with communist ideals. Political dissent was suppressed (Manning 2004b), and modern dance was "laundered . . . of its redder tints" (Banes 1994: 204). As a result, socially oriented, content-based works, an aspect of Marxism favored by the leftist revolutionaries and Nagrin, were not privileged (Laing 1978).

Franko asserts that the most "hotly contended issues" in modern dance at this time were the politically intertwining, complex notions of "form versus content and heritage versus innovation" (1995: 27). There were historical factors at work in shaping this, of course. Before, during, and immediately after World War II, artists, critics, dealers, and collectors fled Europe for New York, which "universalized" the content of art (Goldberg 1988; Greenberg 1961; Hodson 1986; Martin 1968 [1936]). These bohemians were identified as the avant-garde who narrowed their art to the absolutist, modernist expression, "art for art's sake" (Greenberg 1961: 5). Content was dissolved into form, exemplified in dance works in which the body was the medium and content of its expression. Subject matter turned away from the common experience to the personal, finding inspiration in the medium itself and departing from the angular lines of cubism (Greenberg 1961).

In marked contrast to Nagrin's work, the choreographic methods of James Waring, Merce Cunningham, and George Balanchine during the 1950s reflected the nation's cultural and artistic trend toward such abstract and plotless expression. Waring, for example, eliminated narrative and dramatic structure, blending both music and dance styles and using intuition, parody, and collage (Banes 1987, 1993). Cunningham's aesthetic turned from the psychological and expressionist to Zen Buddhism, featuring minimalism, uncluttered, indeterminacy, and chance selection of content, since he felt that the dance is inherently about the human body and its movements (Banes 1987; Copeland 2004). Meanwhile, Nagrin continued to dance and choreograph on Broadway, receiving prestigious awards for his performing (see *Concert Programs*, 1956) and embarking on his first full-evening concerts featuring African American popular jazz music and social dance.

At this time, dance critics such as Doris Hering (*Dance Magazine*) and Jill Johnston (*Dance Observer* and later *The Village Voice*) favored the "new dance" of the 1950s Dance Associates and the Judson Church group of the 1960s (Jackson 2000; Johnston 1955, 1957; Kane 2000). These new dance critics were, however, just as exclusivist as Horst and Martin had been, distancing themselves from those choreographers who operated outside their own personal ideologies of what constituted modern dance or "new" dance. For example, questions of objectivity plagued Johnston's reviews in terms of the critical strategies she used and her preference for certain genres. Deborah Jowitt goes so far as to call Johnston an "engagingly partisan commentator" in light of the latter's personal relationship with Judson member Lucinda Childs during the 1960s (Jowitt 2003: 113; Manning 2004a). Likewise, Horst's personal partnership with Martha Graham made his privileging and promotion of her work suspect. Kane (2000) argues that this bias signaled a change in writing dance criticism that represented an avoidance of the critical, formalist model set by Horst and others.

Nagrin acknowledged that his work "attracted only a limited segment of the New York dance audience and . . . critics" (Nagrin 1994: 80). He seemed to believe that most critics and audiences were used to being *shown* something rather than recognizing the involvement of *doing*. This position elucidates the evaluative criteria being used by viewers, critics, and writers about the dance at the time. It is plausible that writers and critics did not have the necessary historical knowledge to understand Nagrin's nonformal 'agency-as-content' within dance modernism. Critical strategies for viewing dance performance, such as Siegel's concern for what dancers are "actually doing" (1977: 55; 1995) needed to be developed through systematic scholarly attention to choreographic analysis combined with better historical methods.

Only decades later did critic Anna Kisselgoff (1994) recognize the educational value of examining the choreographic content of Nagrin's works, seeing this as an alternative model for young choreographers trained only in the manipulation of form. She understood that Nagrin's works not only provided another way to choreograph but also greatly enhanced the notion of what constitutes 'modernism' in the dance.

Summary and Conclusion

I have argued that Hornsby's (2004: 23) articulation of agent-causation with its "realistic account of human agency" can be seen throughout Nagrin's cluster of choreographic works in his *Dance Portraits*. 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 Nagrin Method." Within his six-step compositional model, Nagrin's *Dance Portraits* are based in his 'X' or specific characters [agents], and his 'core' is found from the *doing* of specific tasks or functions [actions] with effects [from causes]. Nagrin's choice of characters-in-action as agency at work are "exercises of [his] capacities" (ibid.). These bring about both reflexivity and change.

My analysis aims to illuminate Nagrin's conception of the dancing body and his methods, such as the use of agency. He asserts human agency in two ways: creating social critiques and blending genres, using multicultural characters, movement, music, and social themes as content. These compelling social critiques in danced form 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 structural form and embraced themes of social action and popular culture. This distinguished him from his contemporaries, but, as my

examination of the literature reveals, it also led to his marginalization in historical accounts of American Modern Dance.

The Nagrin Method provided a new way to create dances, which positions Nagrin within a separate strand of modernism, one that differed significantly from that adhered to by other choreographers and favored by critics of the time. It is important to emphasize that powerful critics and other writers constructed the prevailing view of modern dance based in formalism (Jackson 2000; Kane 2002). Nagrin's method provides an alternative lens through which we could analyze, read, and narrate the genre of American modern dance differently. Nagrin's use of agency through content and action, among other factors, is part of a larger legacy certainly, but a strand of modernism that merits a re-visiting of historical strategies and modes of analysis of choreographic processes. It suggests the need for both a deeper examination of extant critical and historical writings and more thorough, critical analyses of concert works.

Case Study: *Strange Hero* (1948/1962)

Nagrin's performance of *Strange Hero* (Nagrin 2004b) is a thematic portrait of an immediate aspect of the human condition that he chose to feature. This absurd, cult-status, ironic/iconic gangster/hero was portrayed widely in American popular culture of the 1940s: "Our novels, films and stories have made this hero all too familiar. It is only strange that he is a hero" (Notes from Concert Program 1951).



Photo 1. Photo by Peter Bausch, 1948. Courtesy The Daniel Nagrin Theatre, Film and Dance Foundation, Inc.

First performed in a hotel ballroom in the spring of 1948, Nagrin's Hollywood icon was "one of the few convincing portraits that we have on the dance stage" (McDonagh 1976: 229). A "masterpiece" that passionately "pulls and tugs at one's emotions" (Horst 1957b: 85; 1958: 55), it is considered Nagrin's best and most famous work by both McDonagh (1997) and Williams et al. (1958). Hailed as an "undoubted triumph with his compelling study of viciousness" (Manchester 1953: 7), it is only three minutes and ten seconds in length.

Nagrin confronts the action or problem (Nagrin 1997) through developing a clearly defined specific image and actions as his 'X.' O'Hara (2005) confides that, in rehearsal, Nagrin described the *Strange Hero* character as a "cartoon, a caricature of a lost hero." This dramatic, complex "invisible duet" (Evans 2002: 58) with enemy gang members on the back streets or alleys of an inner city centers on and layers stereotypical, hyped mob actions that help define the character thematically. From my repeated viewings

of the videotape, I classify these deliberate actions as smoking, strutting, deceiving, chasing, hiding, and killing.

Several complex relationships help to define X. Spatial tension is created through the simple but strong opening movement pattern of strutting on the downstage diagonal—which, Nagrin (2001) comments, is a metaphor for entering a dangerous place—and by the frantic focus changes. An underpinning angst and fear resonant in the agitated jazz piano music is noted: "The insistent rhythm of the score supports the mounting tension of a doom-happy character" (Concert Programs, 1951, 1957, 1958[?]). As a recurring thematic relationship throughout the dance, this produces a conflicting texture of anxiety and ease. Further thematic relationships are evident in the minimal but distinct set and the detailed costume of a heavily shoulder-padded pinstriped suit. This opening cluster of components and their interrelatedness immediately frames the contextual period of the impressionistic narrative and establishes the dualistic personality of the attractive hero/terrifying gangster.

Nagrin began choreographing *Strange Hero* by working alone in a studio and exploring the recorded "progressive jazz" music of Stan Kenton kinetically (Nagrin cited in Schlundt 1997: 211).² The strong, ominous rhythm of the song "Monotony" changed his initial intent and shaped his choreographic process. This developed accidentally since he had planned to choreograph a blues dance. Since Nagrin was still "convinced" that he was not musical, he probed the rhythm by using his feet "as if they were fingers picking out the notes" (ibid.). He began walking carefully on the beat and noted that the opening bars of the theme were a bit behind the downbeat; suddenly, an "irreverent feeling emerged . . . Humphrey Bogart and his tribe [of] tough guys" (Nagrin 1951: 23). *Strange Hero*, thus, fuses popular culture's jazz dance, considered lowbrow at that time, with high-art modern concert dance. This is the work's historical relevance.

When performing the piece, every second has a precise inner life that moves it forward, one thing leading to the next, as in life itself. This is why the solo works even today: the pathos of it (backed by the intense inner commitment by the performer) takes it beyond the dated music, costume, and concept (O'Hara 2005).

The skillful use of jazz rhythms as a tool to explore the X has been recognized and the character described as a "jazz-inflected criminal" with "caffeinated responsiveness" (Carbonneau 1995). Even though music and plot contribute to form, Nagrin's emphasis is on process and content, not appearance or codified steps. Commenting on his arbitrary, yet structured, choreographic process of 'getting to the core of X', Nagrin writes that creating a dance is similar to entering a "trackless jungle" as rules, principles, and theories can be a hindrance (Nagrin 1951: 23). This indicates Nagrin's avoidance of manipulating form or dance steps as a primary choreographic structuring device and further substantiates my argument that his dances centered on or from the agency and actions of the characters. In *Strange Hero*, content or function is privileged over any structural elements in the creation of the dance, while recognizing the integral, connected relationship between content and form.

APPENDIX A

Structural Outline for Case Study of

Strange Hero (1948/1962)

[my sectioning and sub-titles]

Choreography and Performance: Daniel Nagrin, 1948

Music: Stan Kenton and Pete Rugolo

Costume: based on a Karinska design

Pianist: Sylvia Marshall

Filmed at WGBH Boston 1962 for the TV series, "A Time to Dance," directed by Martha Myers and produced by Jack Venza.

Time:

No. StartEnd Sections Given Interpretive Titles

- 1 0.01 0.28 **Enter the Gangster:** Strutting and smoking cigarette
- 2 0.28 1.17 **Intrusion, Betrayal, and Fight:** Hears sound, pulls out gun, offers foe cigarette in friendship, then betrays him, punches and knocks out, gloats and struts off
- 3 1.17 1.34 **Attacked:** Startled by another foe, adrenaline jump, ducks, hides, peeks, sees no enemy in sight, then confidently walks away
- 4 1.34 1.49 **The Chase and Catch:** Sees enemies coming, is chased, hides against brick wall, takes a break to smoke, is found, begs for mercy, hands up in surrender
- 5 1.49 2.24 **The Escape and Climax:** walks with hands high, rolls to escape, pulls out imaginary gun, shoots twice, encircles two dead victims, kicks and punches them
- 6 2.24 3.10 **The Denouement and Death:** Pauses to smoke, is surprised, is shot, then shot again, falls down, gets back up, falls backward, Italian-like obscene arm gesture, is shot again, reels and spins and falls backward again, gets up, reels and spins and falls backward again, then lights fade to

From the structural outline I created for this analysis, we can ascertain that *Strange Hero* elucidates a dominant cause-and-effect, nonlinear narrative that also is based in essences and effects. The choreographic phrases based in actions are juxtaposed to create the specific image of American popular culture's gangster-cum-hero. We see the repetition of various movement patterns depicting the engagement with gang enemies in the course of daily life, then killing them. This is consistent throughout except for the last phrase when the gangster/hero is killed. Nagrin explains how content, or essence based in ideas and feelings conveyed through actions, structures this dance and shaped his agency and actions:

Constructing *this* dance was a cinch. I had the music. The nearest movie house was my source material. The simple, monotonous plot shaped the form of the dance: enter the tough guy armed to the teeth, cigarette drooping from arrogant lower lip. He calmly greets his enemies, smashes one, struts a bit, then the chase, the killing and being killed and killing and being killed and so on, *ad nauseum* (Nagrin 1951: 23).

Nagrin's six-question thematic obstacle is demonstrated in this cause-and-effect layering of duality or contradiction, which shapes the phrases and further defines the X. McDonagh (1976) articulates this in his detailed description and interpretation. O'Hara, who performs some of Nagrin's works, sums it up as "in order to go left, . . . you have to go right" (O'Hara 2005). For example, the first dualistic or binary (in

this sense, opposite movement themes rather than rhythmic structures) theme is the impressionistic calm produced by an attractive man smoking whose menacing gangster personality abruptly emerges through aggressive punching. Yet, Nagrin layers these with a contrastingly charming, glamorized impression of a handsomely dressed, Humphrey Bogart-looking street thug (Hering 1958: 82; Jowitt 1974, 1976: 206; Nagrin 1951: 23; Schlundt 1997: 114; 1998: 530). Thus, the conflicted gangster context is juxtaposed against a relational opposite: the "tough" character is also "tender" (Horst 1957b: 85). This binary structure is repeated thematically, and the relationship between these two components creates a continual tension throughout the dance.

Nagrin's treatment of subject matter in *Strange Hero* includes a rhythmic, virtuosic solo that once again relies on the heavy use of literal and exaggerated actions as gestural movements developed from the 'core of X.' For example, smoking and pulling out an imaginary handgun are abstracted into metaphors of a gangster's personality and actions. Contrasting with the use of these gestural and stylized walking movements are virtuosic, noncodified, daring leaps including jumps in the air from a crouched position with legs folded under during the chase and hide scene.

Africanist movement themes (Acocella et al 1995; Dixon Gottschild 1995; Manning 2004a; Welsh Asante 2001) are seen in Nagrin's fluid spine and pelvic freedom. Prosaic movement is demonstrated in the off-centered lunges and balances, various unusual fast spins and turns, and hinges and "incredibly fluid" backward falls (Kisselgoff 1994), all of which give kinetic thrill and excitement. The Hero literally kicks and then punches prone bodies in a straddled, low-level modified split. He steps over bodies to stand in the oft-repeated exaggerated right lunge position, smoking calmly. No graceful, ballet-like movement or specific modern dance technique is used in this work, which further supports the masculine-but-ethnocentric character of the gangster and revealing identity through agentic, empowered personal action. Lights fade to blackout.

Notes:

¹ The classical Greeks Socrates and Plato respected order, reason, intellect, form, beauty; the noble god Apollo represented these ideals. Later, this contrasted with the Hellenists who privileged Aristotle's attention to emotions and feelings, venerating experienced-based, nonformalist kinetic learning by discovery. This 'doing' approach was embodied in Dionysius, the god of wine and orgies.

² This term is commonly used to refer to these four modern dancers. It was applied by dance critic John Martin who privileged their works while omitting Helen Tamiris (1936, 1968).

³ "Abstract" is a misleading word since so-called abstract works are not devoid of meaning, intention, or imagery.

⁴ For example, Denby 1968 [1949]; Jowitt 2004; Martin 1936, 1939; Nagrin 1989; Prickett 1994b; Siegel 1977, 1985; and Theodores 1996.

⁵ Scholars such as Franko 1995; Graff 1994; Harris 1996; Jackson 2000; Melosh 1994; and Prickett 1994a and b have, however, challenged the modern dance history based on Martin's critiques.

⁶ Greenberg suggests that popular culture's art or 'kitsch' is a product of the industrial revolution's urbanized masses that brought about a demand for a less elite culture and art (Greenberg 1961: 15).

⁷ Schlundt confuses the date of the first performance with the year that it was choreographed, saying it was first performed "sometime in spring 1948" (1997: 31) but that Nagrin began work on this in the "summer of 1948" (211), while her index lists the premier in 1949 (84).

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