

BOOK REVIEWS

JACKY LANSLEY (2017) *Choreographies: Tracing the Materials of an Ephemeral Art Form*. Bristol, UK, and Chicago, USA: Intellect. 256 pp. ISBN 978-1783207664. Paperback. £28.50.

Dance, as an art that disappears, presents a great challenge for its survival, and “writing” may provide one of the possible ways for it to remain. “Writing” through words, symbols and images is the way that the independent choreographer Jacky Lansley has chosen to document her artistic oeuvre in the book *Choreographies: Tracing the Materials of an Ephemeral Art Form*. In this book, Lansley wishes to define choreography in order to provide a better understanding of its multiple manifestations. She intends to expose the “hidden elements” that underpin the choreographic process and to explore the influences and processes that lead to the making of choreography; to shed light on the preparation needed for the choreographic material to emerge and the way the choreographic making begins. She answers these questions by reflecting on her own practice and choreographic process, and on how it has changed over the years – specifically from 1972 to 2017 – under the influence of the cultural and social climate in flux.

For those unfamiliar with Lansley’s work, apart from her renowned career as a member of the Royal Ballet Company and as an independent choreographer, she is the director of one of the most vibrant research spaces in London, the Dance Research Studio. Currently, she is the director of the recent interdisciplinary and intergenerational project *About Us* (2018), which is on tour in the UK. Previously, she was the co-founder (with Sally Potter) of Limited Dance Company (1974), a dance company that used “very ‘limited’ dance”. Another important highlight in her career is her involvement with the seminal X6 Dance Space, an independent studio where a group of British dance artists, comprising Mary Prestidge, Maedée Duprès, Emilyn Claid and Fergus Early, found a refuge for experimental choreography. During the 70s, the New Dance movement, which emerged from X6 Dance, was concerned with placing dance within a wider social and cross-disciplinary context. Engagement with community, education and somatic training were the main interests of the New Dance movement, which has been fundamental for the development of today’s British dance scene.

At the beginning of her book (titled “Inward”), Lansley states that “[a]bove all I would like this book to be read as a form of choreography which is close to artistic and body impulses” (p. 3). Indeed, her book is a collection of artistic materials in the form of Lansley’s reflections, notes

and choreographic scores fused with reports, reviews, discussions, photographs and drawings. More specifically, chapters 1 and 2 discuss her early works, especially the ones placed in museums and galleries. Dance objects, which might recall Forsythe's choreographic objects,¹ are the additional focus of chapter 2. However, dance objects, different from choreographic objects, which resemble dance scores, are fragments of movements that, not unlike portable and tangible objects, can be recomposed in any order. In this sense, dance objects are closer to Cunningham's Dance Events which are fragments "dissected from already existing works and then spliced together into new combinations" (Copeland, 2004, p. 171) through chance procedures. What is very particular about the analysis of dance objects is the connection with "The Choreographic Exchange", a model invented by Lansley for examining the artistic interchanges that appear among the contributors during the choreographic process. As she proposes, choreographic exchange occurs when the collaborators can treat the dance material as a portable object that can be moved, positioned or transposed, and thus be transformed collectively. Chapter 3 continues to discuss works that span the period from 1980 to 1990, particularly reconstructions of classical works (*I, Giselle*, 1980; *Les Diables*, 1998–1999), and chapters 4–8 reflect on choreographic processes that have emerged both from a stable studio space (*Holding Space*, 2004) and a site-specific enquiry (*View from the Shore*, 2007; *Standing Stones*, 2008). The book's style is dialectical as it includes conversations among Lansley's collaborators, such as Diana Davies and Sally Potter, and very detailed and informative footnotes provide an additional historical, social and political context for her work.

In chapters 4, 6 and 8 Lansley uses a form that is called "Writing Choreography". As she claims, she first introduced the term "writing dance" as part of the *New Dance Magazine* (1977–1988) in order to argue for the need of analysing and discussing dance, especially the kind of dance associated with the New Dance movement. "Writing Choreography", as an extension of "writing dance", is used "to visually materialise the live event", to trace what remains from a choreographic oeuvre that is ephemeral by nature, and "to enable the reader to 'watch' the performers and get closer to the live work and the choreographic process" (p. 3). Both "writing dance" and "writing choreography" are further expanded by her view of choreographer as author, a concept greatly aligned to the European concept of *danse d'auteur*² or *danza d'autore*.³ Although both *danse d'auteur* and *danza d'autore* remain confined to the language of dance and they deal less with the theorising of movement, they all support the view of an

1 A choreographic object, as a score, is "an alternative site for the understanding of potential instigation and organisation of action to reside" (online).

2 *Danse d'auteur* in French or *danza d'autore* in Italian (authorial dance). In France *danse d'auteur* follows André Bazin's (1957) theorising of *cinéma d'auteur*: "the author in film, as in dance, is first of all the author of a speech act which gives a point of view on the world, and, in this respect, is not interested in the very instrumentation which might constitute the actual material of a language" (Gore, Louppe and Piollet, 2000, p. 39).

3 *Danza d'autore* "stresses the unique imprint conferred on the dance by its author (or autore)" (Poesio, 2000, p. 106).

authorial voice expressed by / assigned to the choreographer.⁴

Based on notes, dance scores, descriptions, reviews and images, the form of the book made me wonder what the essence of “writing choreography” is. Considering the disproportional balance between reflection and description or reviews, I am wondering whether “writing choreography” could only be an account of an artist’s oeuvre and whether reflective writing as “movement in thought” (Bolt, 2007, p. 33) could find its place in this concept. Although both describing and reflecting on a process are equally important, I very much enjoyed the reflective tone of the short introductions of every chapter. However, as a reader, I wanted to learn more about this kind of writing that represents Lansley’s voice at this particular moment of her life, when she is able to criticise and theorise her works through the lens of today. Although reviews and photos by collaborators and interviews with others create a valuable insight into Lansley’s choreographic process, I was eager to hear more her authorial and independent voice that derives from her long-standing experience as a freelance choreographer.

Throughout the book, there is a consistent preoccupation of the author with what choreography is and what dance is. This preoccupation is evidenced in the chapter “Other Voices” (p. 133), which includes transcribed interviews with Rosemary Lee, Tony Thatcher, Matthew Hawkins and Miranda Tufnell. All the interviews begin with the question, “What is choreography?”, and they are concerned with where to place experimental choreographic work. Although I am wondering why it is important to place experimental choreography into a specific field, Lansley throughout her career has been concerned with where her choreographic product could fit. This is a question that reflects the effect of economic realities, the aesthetic concerns and the political climate from which her work arose. She positions choreography into an interdisciplinary field located between “painting, sculpture and performance” and influenced by “artistic, conceptual and theatrical strategies” (p. 6). Eminent throughout the book is the author’s insistence that choreography is far from placing and connecting dance steps one after another. Choreography is a deeply hybrid practice, an interdisciplinary practice between movement and visual arts.

Considering that there is not so much available video documentation from her earlier works, the book is a valuable source for getting familiar with the spirit of an era that has influenced the current dance scene of Britain towards somatic training, site-specific work, interdisciplinarity and social engagement. Above all, this book is a self-generated archive of choreographic processes that has an incredible value for anyone interested in choreography as an interdisciplinary and independent practice. Questioning the limits of choreography is as relevant as it was back in the 1970s, and demystifying choreographic processes is always a fascinating revelation. *Choreographies: Tracing the Materials of an Ephemeral Art Form* is a

4 The need of authorial choreographic voices could be understood with ease when examining the choreographic labour in relation to the performing arts industry. As Lansley claims, in several commercial productions, the input of the choreographer remains obscured while it is fundamental.

sort of biographical story where choreographic inquiry merges with narrations about the struggle for establishment (owning a space), recognition, and balancing the versatile profile of a choreographer, defined by Lansley as “an author, some kind of dance and movement expert, researcher, possibly a teacher, dancer, director, deviser, manager, producer and often a film-maker” (pp. 153–154). Given that the book examines choreography as a cross-disciplinary practice between dance and visual arts, it is relevant to anyone interested in how to make choreographies; students, teachers, artists, and historians alike. (Personally, as a choreographer who thinks that she cannot fit in conventional theatrical spaces, I became very attached to Lansley’s writing and was encouraged to continue my interdisciplinary practice).

ARIADNE MIKOU
DANCE ARTIST AND SCHOLAR

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KONSTANTINA GEORGELOU, EFROSINI PROTOPAPA, DANAE THEODORIDOU (eds) (2017), *The Practice of Dramaturgy: Working on Actions in Performance*. Amsterdam: Valiz. Antennae/Arts in Society series. 303 pp. ISBN 978-9492095183. Paperback. £19.50.

The book *The Practice of Dramaturgy: Working on Actions in Performance* is the result of a research project entitled “Dramaturgy at Work”, which took place from 2013 to 2015 in different cities across Europe, bringing together artists and scholars.¹ Initiated by Konstantina Georgelou, Efrosini Protopapa and Danae Theodoridou, co-authors and editors of the volume, the project’s point of departure was the question, “Why dramaturgy today?”, aiming to open up a reflection on the role and function of dramaturgy. The overall organization of the book is informed to a great extent by the dynamic of the research process that preceded it, meaning that what the authors propose has been elaborated on a working mode of questioning rather than affirming, and this working mode was collective and thus exposed to different individual activations.

Essential to the authors’ approach of dramaturgy are three interconnected suggestions that seem to stretch the ways one might relate to this notion and the different realities it conveys. The first one invites to approach dramaturgy as a practice that does not necessarily coincide with the work of the dramaturge, but rather constitutes a shared activity among the collaborators involved in a working process (pp. 16–17). The second one proposes to think of dramaturgy as a process “that unfolds *within* a work’s making” (pp. 17–19) and is precisely referring to this *unfolding* of the work moving it forward, rather than to a process of “performance analysis” or “coherence-making” that would optimize the work. The third one proposes to consider dramaturgy as a “singular term” (pp. 14–16). This last point seems to be of crucial importance as it helps to counterbalance what one might feel today as a complete relativisation of the notion of dramaturgy – the possible responses to “what dramaturgy is” seem to be as many as the multiple and diverse practices that are to be found in the heterogeneous landscape of the performing arts today, as the authors note. This relativisation may slow down or even completely suspend any attempt to reflect upon this notion. Approaching dramaturgy as a “singular term” does not mean here to reduce it to a single definition or even to look for a definition; it rather means to attempt to address this notion in a direct way that will help to expose and intensify its *singularity* as a process which is common to all artistic work.

1 For a detailed presentation of the project, see: <https://dramaturgyatwork.wordpress.com/>

Departing from these suggestions, the authors also propose a reconceptualization of dramaturgy by returning back to its etymology for recovering the notions of "action" (*drama*) and "work" (*ergon*); by doing so, they activate a dual operation already contained in dramaturgy: *how actions work* and *how one works on actions* (p. 20). The simple fact of explicitly formulating these two operations seems to already accelerate the potential the word "dramaturgy" can produce within one's own practice in terms of reflection. If the first operation – *how actions work* – directs the attention towards the "activity" that takes place during a working process, the second one – *how one works on actions* – shifts the attention towards the subject, the way one activates oneself within the specificity of a process, or the way one *acts*. The authors consider both operations, but insist more on the second one; this accelerates throughout the book a reflection on one's own ways of engaging in a process (even the process of reading the book). Working within this framework, the authors propose three principles in relation to dramaturgy that may inform its practice: *mobilizing questions*, *alienating* and *commoning*.

The first part of the book, co-authored by Georgelou, Protopapa and Theodoridou, unfolds these three principles that arose, as they note, from critical reflection on the workshops and roundtable discussions within the context of the project "Dramaturgy at Work". The authors present them with what seems to be a dual attention. On the one hand, they describe specific practices they proposed during the project and share their observation of them, rendering more concrete for the reader the operations that informed the formulation of these principles. On the other hand, they situate them within the critical discourse on dramaturgy, drawing on it or revisiting some of its points that seem to have become too evident, and this way of proceeding offers the reader who might not be necessarily familiar with dramaturgy an access to its distinct discursive field.

I would mostly like to insist here on the mode in which these principles are introduced by the authors, which informs on, I think in a substantial way, what makes the quality of this book. These principles are not proposed as "tools" or a specific type of "dramaturgical methodology" but rather "as general principles that convey a certain approach to dramaturgical practice, a way of doing dramaturgy that has a specific force to it" – what they call a "quality of *setting into motion*" (p. 66). This *setting-into-motion* quality is already at work, while reading the book, in the way the authors unfold these principles progressively, without reducing them into the function of a definition, but being attentive to preserving their suggestive force. Or, put differently, these principles are not proposed in a prescriptive way, but rather they function as *invitations* to the reader to reflect upon one's own practice. By introducing them in such a way, the authors open up a space, both for the reader *and* for these principles, that seems to preserve the potential of their activations, meaning the prospective ways one might choose to respond or to relate to them, or to bring them into one's own practice. Throughout the book it becomes clear that these principles refer to an overall *attitude* that informs one's singular activation within the specificity of a collective working process. They are thus proposed as *working modes* –

mobilizing questions, alienating, commoning – that can generate tools, practices and actions and “they can only be fully shaped at the moment when dramaturgy enters a specific process” (p. 66).

I will not attempt to summarize them here risking to oversimplify what the authors unfold in a carefully structured way, except to say that: all three of them refer essentially to modes of engaging one’s attention within the specificity of a working process; and all three of them are introduced by the authors in such a way that they invite to what I could describe as a shift of attention. In the principle of mobilizing questions the emphasis is not to be placed on the questions one formulates during a process (maybe the most common representation of dramaturgy: that one should ask the efficient questions leading to the right answers and thus to an optimization of the work) but on the *operation of mobilizing* them, the way one *operates in questions* or activates oneself in *a state of questioning*, what the authors call a “state of questioning *as an attitude*” (p. 43). The principle of alienating invites to a shift of attention from one’s *linear* relation to a working process – what one intends to do and projects to the work, which is inevitably informed by knowledge that gathers experientially and often turns into patterns – towards what the work *is already doing* and producing as potential. As the authors note: “Estranging one’s self from one’s own norms can help them remove the preconceived, established clichés that overflow a work even before it starts – clichés that relate to the way we think about what should be done, how, when, and with what outcome” (p. 50). The principle of commoning informs a mode of attention that monitors closely the distribution of individual activations within a collective process *taking care* of what the authors call “plurality *at work*” (p. 55) as a differential process that makes possible the search and production of “commons” between many. This last point informs a conception of dramaturgy as “an attentive engagement that is distributed among everyone involved in a process” (p. 59). These *shifts of attention* may operate as “catalysts” within a process, a term introduced by the authors to describe the way the three principles they propose function: “like catalysts, they transform and develop a process *without necessarily controlling it*”; this idea of the three principles operating as “catalysts”, i.e. as elements that may trigger a series of activations within a process without controlling its outcome, is unfolded in a very concrete way in the first part of the book.

The second part of the book opens up to include twelve contributions by guest authors coming from distinct backgrounds and research areas – performance and theatre making, choreography, performance theory and research, visual arts, dramaturgy – who have participated at one point or another in the project “Dramaturgy at Work”. The texts are organized by the editors under four headings: “Dramaturgy as Conversation”, “Queering Dramaturgy”, “Dramaturgy or Not: Shaking the Grounds” and “Out of this World: Rescaling Dramaturgy”. This organization does not intend to define specific directions in a strictly exclusive way, but rather to suggest what one could describe as four dynamic terrains where the practice of dramaturgy seems to produce accelerations. Reading these texts one gets a concrete idea of the questions dramaturgy sets

in motion today for those practicing it, or relating to it in any kind of way within their distinct fields of activity, identifying as dramaturges or not. Each text could be seen as proposing both a *reflection on* dramaturgy and a singular *practicing of* dramaturgy, unfolding each author's elaboration of what the editors often refer to in the book as *dramaturgical thinking*. In other words, these texts could be seen as twelve manifestations of dramaturgy *at work*, each one operating in its own singular mode and agency, and each one proposing a situated response to the initial question at the origin of this book and the research project it comes from: Why dramaturgy today?

When thought of as dramaturgical processes in themselves, one of the most interesting functions of these texts has to do with the way they render each author's activation transparent. So, apart from proposing a multiplicity of perspectives *on* dramaturgy, these texts expose multiple operations of putting oneself *at work*, i.e. activating oneself within a process while being, at the same time, activated by the specificity of that very process. By doing so, the texts offer the reader a dynamic access to the way the authors who participated in the project "Dramaturgy at Work" *acted* within its framework and were *acted upon* by it. And the experience of reading these texts even gives the desire to have access to a kind of raw documentation of the project that would allow a first-degree observation of its own "dramaturgy" – the overall project's dramaturgy understood here as this dual operation proposed by the editors: the working of actions and the working on actions.

The concluding part of the book, entitled "In Conversation", takes the form of a dialogue between the editors. By posing questions and discussion points to one another, they look back on the experience of the elaboration of the book, seeking also, as they note, to foreground and unpack the dynamics, differences and antagonisms between them. This conversation could be seen in itself as an instance of *practicing dramaturgy*. The experience of reading it becomes even more interesting as the form of the dialogue exposes directly *the workings* of each author's singular activation. These activations produce a dramaturgical thinking unfolding almost in real time where the reader might detect *at work* the three principles proposed in the book: mobilizing questions, alienating, commoning.

MYRTO KATSIKI

PARIS 8 UNIVERSITY, DANCE DEPARTMENT