Amber Heaven

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March 13, 2012

Analysis of “Smoke”

 In the first section of the modern dance piece “Smoke” choreographed by

Mats Ek a relationship between a man and a woman is introduced. They support and lift one another, carrying each other through their struggles. The second section explores the complexities of this relationship. There is much more contention now between the two people. They shout at each other and throw each other around. There is a subtle build in the movement that goes right up until the very end of the dance.

As the man and woman yell at one another, it is visible in the woman’s face

that she has finally cracked. She grabs him by the hand and throws him against the black wall. His form slowly fades away, as if he is being sucked into the black hole behind him that he created himself. Over 12 minutes of dancing sets up the relationship between this man and woman only to have it come crumbling down on the woman as she looks back, the camera catching her last expression of shock at what she has done. This is how the second section of the modern dance piece choreographed by Mats Ek ends. The third section is a solo for the woman, performed by Sylvie Guillem.

This is the part of Mats Ek’s choreography that I am going to be looking at in further

detail. I have always loved this dance, and I have known many others who love it as

well, but my question is, why? I think that the most important reason is how relatable it is. The way the dance is choreographed builds off of three abstracted motifs and symbols that express the regret she feels at what she has done to their relationship; there is a mirror motif, a cleaning motif, and an undressing motif. These motifs are all very ordinary things that people do every single day, however through these motifs Mats Ek creates a commonplace symbol in an abstract dance that makes it more relatable to a wide audience. Some people, including famous modern dance choreographers, believe that gestures or everyday motions are not dancing. For example Isadora Duncan believed that gestures had no feeling to them but were merely simple actions that replace language (41). However other notable choreographers, such as Martha Graham, believe that gestures are a form of communication that all human beings inherently understand (7). Sometimes in modern dance simple gestures are thought of as ordinary and pantomimic. Some modern dancers and choreographers think that these motions are for the theatre and not the dance world, however I disagree. I think that gestures are movements that can bridge different cultures and societies. If we find ourselves in a situation trying to communicate with someone who doesn’t speak our language we use simple gestures. These pedestrian movements are a universal language. Isn’t that what dance should be? According to Brannigan, “gestures are the raw material for dance and are treated to processes of translation or transformation utilizing a variety of techniques…to produce original movement” (64).

In the book The Intimate Act of Choreography, Blom and Chaplin paraphrase

Ray Birdwhistell saying, “[He] warns that no body position or movement in and of itself has a precise meaning” (130). I believe that’s true. I don’t think that it is possible to see one movement and know exactly what a person is trying to communicate. Everyone has different experiences and beliefs; so one small movement can mean something completely different to someone else. For example, if someone puts their arm up in the air, it could mean that they’re waving down a taxi, or they know the answer to a question asked by a teacher. It could mean that they’re signaling to a friend their whereabouts in a crowd, or they’re shielding the sun out of their eyes. All of these things are completely different with the same or similar movement. So how can anyone know what the real meaning of the movement is? If you notice, all of those instances can be interpreted correctly if the context is known beforehand. I also think that facial expressions, as well as body language, go hand in hand. I think that same thing goes with dance. Maybe your interpretation won’t be perfectly correct, but you can make decisions based on the context and motions, as well as the emotions, that are the right ideas. Even if the motions are slightly abstracted, it is easy to make meaning of a movement when the context of the piece is known and the performer expresses the correct emotion. Modern dance especially has a lot more abstract movements that begin toward people off because it’s weird, or hard to understand, however it is also the dance form that has the most pedestrian movements sometimes. As Mats Ek does in this piece, the pedestrian movements can be used to take a dance that is abstract   and make it relatable to the general public. When interviewed about where he gets his inspiration Mats Ek said, “I don’t give a damn if it’s classical or modern or if it’s taken from the streets or if it’s just something strange we found, as long as it works in the context” (Glentzer). In Ek’s eyes dance is movement and movement is dance, it doesn’t matter where the movement came from as long as it expresses what he wants it to express. Although these are pedestrian movements, there are some abstract moments mixed in with them. For the purpose of this paper I am going to take the emotions expressed on Guillem’s face, the context of the piece, and Laban Movement Analysis to figure out what these motifs are trying to express to an audience, and why they are relatable. Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) is a system of notation developed by Rudlof Laban that is used to make meaning from movement. I will be using a lot of Laban’s work to help me support my analysis of this dance. Laban worked alongside Irmgard Bartenieff, and together they created today what is now known as LMA. Irmgard contributed a lot of things but what she is most known for are her Patterns of Total Body Connectivity. These patterns show the bodily relationship and how they can be interpreted in movement. Laban worked a lot on how movement can be qualitatively described and what those qualitative elements say about the meaning of a movement.

The first motif is the mirror motif. What I mean by the mirror motif is that throughout the solo there are moments where Guillem will pretend to be looking in a mirror at her reflection. The first time this happens, she is walking towards the wall where there is a black rectangle, reminiscent of the size and shape of a mirror.

As she is walking towards the “mirror”, which is actually a black square on the wall, she trips and stumbles towards it quickly regaining her stability as if nothing out of the ordinary happened. This is very pedestrian movement that is easily understandable and relatable, but it is also applicable. She stumbled. This is a sign of weakness. It is a way to demonstrate how lost she feels but how she tries to cover it up when it shows out in the open. For this motif Guillem is not facing the camera, so we are unable to see what her face is expressing, however I am going to draw conclusions on this motif from her Body Attitude. Peggy Hackney, a Certified Movement Analyst who worked very closely with Irmgard Bartenieff, describes Body Attitude as the “characteristic body stance (torso relationship or torso/limb relationship) that is persistently used and from which all activity develops and returns” (233). Throughout this motif, Guillem consistently comes back to a very stiff and vertical torso. When it is not stiff and vertical it is still being very controlled and tense. There is nothing comfortable about this stance, suggesting that as she is looking at herself in the mirror, she is uncomfortable and uneasy at looking at her reflection. As she quickly stands up straight in front of the wall, her hand comes up and over her head, framing her face. It almost looks like she is unconvinced by her face, like she isn’t fooled by the person she puts on the outside and she can see who is really staring back at her. There is a slow build with the speed and sharpness of the movement until she jumps her legs apart, looking down, as if she can’t look at herself anymore. The slow build has a sense that she losing her grip with herself, and she doesn’t like what she sees in her reflection, so she looks down in hopes that maybe when she looks back at her reflection in a little while she will see someone different. She begins to use her Head-Tail here, in an exaggerated way. Head-Tail is the relationship in the spine. Our spine says a lot about who we are as an individual and what our feelings are. Because the Head-Tail relationship is all about the individual and knowing oneself (Hackney, 85), this suggests the trouble that she is having with her reflection is such a real and tangible thing that she needs to look away, gather a few breaths, and then look back. It also supports that she is not sure of who she is anymore, and it’s almost as if she is trying to find herself quickly through those short moments of the change in her Head-Tail. She is trying to move it and make it more mobile so she doesn’t look and feel so uncomfortable. She looks again at herself, but turns away in disappointment. She wipes her forehead and turns back toward the mirror to see if she may be seeing things. She Suspends (lingers) this moment as if she isn’t quite ready to see herself again, which builds a tension in the feeling. She turns away for a final time Sinking Passively in her chest as if she is defeated. The Sinking in the torso with a Passive approach to Weight suggests that she has given up, because she is giving her weight in to gravity. She isn’t even bothered with trying to fight it anymore. The second time the mirror motif comes up is later in the dance when she is holding a piece of paper in front of her face, as if she is reading a letter. The paper slips from her fingers to the floor but her position does not change. It is as though she is so stunned at what she read her body freezes in the moment. Her eyes are  shaded as if she is completely internal. She is completely out of Space meaning that she is not attending to her environment at all (Dell, 29). Cecily Dell talks about moments when people are out of Space, and she says that they are the moments when you see someone who is internally focused, and is maybe remembering something or imagining something (29). I think that is what Guillem is doing at this moment. As her character, she is thinking about what she read in the letter and she removes Space to bring her focus internally. It is incredibly easy to relate to this moment. Everyone knows what it is like to come completely internal and forget about the environment around them while they remember or think about something. When I take myself out of Space I feel vulnerable. I feel like I’m not focusing on what I should be, and that I’m thinking of something too deeply. I can’t control what my face is doing and so I worry that someone may have seen my face and then seen what I was thinking about written all over it. She quickly recovers by putting a hand up in front of her face as if she is holding a mirror compact and changing her expression from shock to worry. She widens her eyes and then furrows her brow. She brings Space back here in a Direct way, looking at herself. This brings her back out of her mind and out into the environment again. Her other hand makes its way down her face as if tracing the outline of her expression. Quickly she closes her hand, as if closing the mirror compact so as not to look at herself again.

It’s as if she realizes that she is out of Space and feels vulnerable there so she quickly brings herself back to the environment, checking her expression before moving on. I think that these pedestrian movements are things that anyone can relate to. It is something that is very common to look in a mirror. Personally I look at myself in a mirror roughly ten times a day. Of course not everyone looks in a mirror that often, but it is something that is inescapable. There are reflective surfaces everywhere in this world. Whether it’s in the side of a building, or in the surface of a pool of water, it is natural to see ourselves, and maybe even dislike what we see.

The second pedestrian motif that Ek uses is a cleaning motif. The woman turns to her knees and begins to scrub the floor vigorously with the skirt of her dress. It is a very Direct and Strong movement, signifying she is putting all of her Weight behind the scrubbing, desperate to get one spot on the floor clean. She is completely focused on this one spot that she is supposed to get clean, meaning that she can’t see the whole picture, but only this one blemish that she is determined to erase. The interesting thing about it is that she is using her own dress to scrub the floor, which would only transfer the dirt and grime onto her dress. It’s a counterproductive action, and yet she puts all of her effort and energy into it. She picks up her skirt and wrings it as hard as if squeezing all of the water out of it. It is as if she is trying to right her wrongs. Clean up the mess that she has made, and yet it isn’t working. She is quickly distracted by something else and abandons the cleaning, as if she knew it was useless all along. Although it is useless she is still trying to be clean and surround herself with clean things. Most people know what it is like to scrub and scrub at one spot on the floor that won’t come off. There is that frustration that comes from working so hard at something that is so useless. Eventually there is that moment when you just give up because you know it’s futile. In an abstract sense, most people know what it is like when they do something they regret and how they want to erase that one moment. They try and try, but there is no erasing the past.

The final motif that Mats Ek uses is an undressing motif. The first time this comes into play is when Guillem is sitting down and she hears the man’s footsteps walking past her. She immediately hunches over to take her shoes off and throws them away. The movement is triggered by the sounds of the man’s feet, or her past.

She can hear footsteps and takes off her shoes as if that may solve the problem of the haunting footsteps. This shows that what she has done is constantly plaguing her and she tries to get rid of the problem but it can’t work because her shoes are not making the noise. This is another moment where she is facing the back and her Body Attitude becomes more informative than her face. This moment has the same stiff and inflexible spine. This accentuates the same discomfort and uneasiness she is feeling. There is stillness while the man walks past, but as soon as the sound of the shoes stops, she quickly removes her shoes without hesitation. The Quickness of her movement is desperate. Most people know what it is like to feel desperate. When I feel desperate I want to solve whatever problem it is immediately. I’m willing to try whatever I can think of to escape that feeling.

There is another moment soon afterwards when she begins to undress. She does it in a very pedestrian way, where she unbuttons her coat, and takes off her hat and shoes. As she takes off her dress the video rewinds so that she puts it back on. There is something so vulnerable about that moment. As human beings we are at our most vulnerable when we are undressing or without clothing. Clothing protects us and covers us from the rest of the world, but when you are undressing, for that one brief moment you are fully exposed. It is almost as if she is trying to show herself to the world, and expose her feelings of regret for what she has done, but she is struggling to do that. The fact that it rewinds shows that if she were to fully expose those feelings and secrets, then she would regret revealing those secrets, so she doesn’t.

These pedestrian gestures are things that most people do on a daily basis, but they have a specific feeling attached to them. Of course I’m not saying that every time I look in the mirror I can’t look at my reflection very long because I can see myself for what I’ve done and the secrets that I have. But there are times in my life when that is true. And at those times the emotions that I am feeling are similar to what Mats Ek possibly asked Sylvie Guillem to portray. I suppose a good question to ask is why is it important to even bother with trying to interpret movement? Well, you could really ask that question of any art form. But the artist made that art for a reason. Most of the time an artist will make something to express a certain emotion that they can relate to, and I know as a choreographer myself that it is just as important for my audience to relate to my movement as it is for me to feel that emotion. I make my art to share it with people.

Being a modern dancer I can begin to count how many times people have asked me if I do the “weird stuff” they’ve seen somewhere or another. I understand sometimes what they are talking about because modern dance can be quite strange sometimes. But there are some pieces that can touch your heart and make you feel something. Mostly the pieces that do that are the works that have something that you relate to. And in order to relate to a wide audience, it is a good idea to have something that is pedestrian within the abstract movement. It creates symbols that the general public can interpret themselves and understand, even with little knowledge of dance. Mats Ek’s piece is just one of those that takes the audience on a journey, no matter what background you are from, or what language you speak. It can relate to you in a personal way. It bridges cultures and societies through the universal language: dance.

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