Books

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Dancing across the Proscenium

_Dramaturgy in Motion: At Work on Dance and Movement Performance_
by Katherine Profeta
Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2015

Katherine Profeta’s _Dramaturgy in Motion_ is really two books in one. It is an in-depth, almost ethnographic exploration of choreographer Ralph Lemon’s work since the late 1990s, when Profeta joined him as dramaturg and he began a series of ambitiously multifaceted, research-driven, intercultural projects; at the same time, Profeta steps back to reflect upon dance dramaturgy more generally as a practice. Her book thus both exemplifies the dramaturgical—one could read it as a kind of extended magnum opus of a program note—and simultaneously seeks to explain more abstractly what the dramaturgical is in relation to choreographic creativity.

Profeta’s study is at its most riveting when it successfully integrates the two foci, bringing the specifics of Lemon’s own art into conversation with theoretical observations about what it means to pursue movement-based dramaturgy. In those moments, one glimpses how the dramaturgical has been crucial to what another dance dramaturg, Jenn Joy, describes as shifts in “the choreographic.” Joy points to the transformation in recent decades from the writing of dance on bodies by choreographers to a far more adventurous experiment in designing movement with bodies through devised processes and collaborative creation. This she regards as fostering “the possibility of sensual address—a dialogic opening in which art not only is looked at but also looks back, igniting a tremulous hesitation in the ways that we experience and respond.” Within this context, it makes sense that dramaturgy, the theory and practice of dramatic composition, would become a part of choreography as it moves from being an act of imposition to one of discovery. The whole question of how to compose (or resist composing,
or be met with resistance to composition by) bodies moving through space emerges. Indeed, various artistic, ethical, and political fault lines crack wide open as the previously ordered and constrained landscape of ballet, modern dance, and other dominant genres give way. Choreography becomes suffused with myriad theoretical and practical concerns that, for many, only dramaturgy seems capable of addressing.

Over five chapters that focus on language and text, research, audience, movement, and interculturalism, Profeta takes up the matter of how dramaturgy might do so. Drawing upon memories, e-mail correspondence, notebooks, and other materials from her time with Lemon and his collaborators, she offers keen insights into what constitutes effective dance dramaturgy, as well as what continues to puzzle her. Her book joins a recent spate of essays and books about the topic, but it is the first full-length study of dance dramaturgy in particular.2 That Profeta is among the first to address dance dramaturgy at length may come as a surprise since in the theater world as a whole the dramaturg is a long familiar, if controversial, figure. This is far less the case, however, with dance. Fortunately, Profeta is well positioned for the task of seeing dramaturgy as both old and new, long practiced and freshly invigorated. She was a founding member of the Elevator Repair Service theater company before joining Lemon and her own career has often crisscrossed between theater and dance, as well as between hands-on creativity and scholarly analysis.

As Profeta points out, the dramaturg was traditionally (and in many cases still is) the keeper of the history that shaped productions, or the in-house critic, or an institutional force shaping presentations, or some combination thereof. Since the 1960s, however, theatrical dramaturgy has become far more distributed across the members of a company and their collaborators. The move from the centralized role of one dramaturg to the decentered activity of “the dramaturgical” among many participants in fact parallels shifts in more avant-garde forms of choreography since the 1960s. Yet, as Profeta notes, the full migration of dramaturgy into the dance world is of fairly recent vintage. It was not until 1979, when Raimund Hoghe became dramaturg for Pina Bausch and her Tanztheater, that someone explicitly identified in the role (although as Profeta mentions in her book, long before Hoghe, dance dramaturgs existed without the name: the
Ballets Russes had its Sergei Diaghilev, George Balanchine had his Lincoln Kirstein, Merce Cunningham his long-running partnership with John Cage.

Only with Bausch did a particular person take on the job of dramaturg, yet this occurred at the very same moment that Bausch purposely destabilized the dominant place of both choreographer or dramaturg by asking her dancers themselves to enter more fully into dramaturgical-oriented choreographic tasks. There is an irony here: the dance dramaturg emerges as a discrete role precisely as the dramaturgical disperses itself across all the makers of a dance work. Perhaps this has to do with contemporary dance’s funny urge toward mobility, something Profeta is intent to highlight in her book: the new figure of the dramaturg appears on stage, or, better put, backstage; the fruits of her labor quickly circulate to the rest of the ensemble. Since Bausch’s groundbreaking work in the 1980s, dance makers have only grown more interested in areas of exploration that suit the dramaturgical. These include research-driven inquiry; cross-disciplinary endeavors that link dance to the visual arts, performance art, science, political activism, film, digital culture, and other fields; philosophical and conceptual issues; deconstructionist ideas; documentary-oriented approaches; and site-specific productions.

Dramaturgy in Motion, however, is not a critical history of dance dramaturgy. That book remains to be written, and it might adopt a more fully archival approach to historicize choreography’s turn to dramaturgy in the context of late-twentieth-century art making, economic changes, and political shifts. While she includes a quick and effective historical overview, Profeta is far more interested in harvesting her interactions with Lemon to pursue a multidimensional and affirmational definition of the activities that define dance dramaturgy now. To be sure, she wants to describe what a dance dramaturg does with precision, but even then the terms proliferate. As Profeta wryly writes, when confronted by “a favorite relative, a curious student, a cocktail-party acquaintance,” she maintains “a list of terms in mind that I can either support or refute, sometimes both in turn, as more specific models or metaphors for the dramaturgical role . . . researcher, editor, questioner, catalyst, historian, archivist, literary manager, outside eye, inside eye, advocate for the audience, advocate for anything but the audience, witness, midwife, gadfly, friend, and even amateur shrink” (14). In more academic circles, she also refers to the historical antecedents of theater dramaturgs such as Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and Bertolt Brecht.

Profeta refuses simplistic, reductive explanations of dance dramaturgy. “If it can be defined at all,” she writes of the role of the dramaturg, it “can only be as a quality of motion, which oscillates, claiming an indeterminate zone between theory and practice, inside and outside, word and movement, question and answer” (xvi–xvii). Building on the work of prior practitioner-theorists such as Marianne Van Kerkhoven, André Lepécki, Heidi Gilpin, Myriam Van Imschoot, Hildegard De Vuyst, and Bojana Cvejić, Profeta seeks to “imagine the dramaturg as a figure engaged in a dance of entrance and exit, of play across the doorsill” that divides the rehearsal studio and the performance...
space from the larger world (16). For Profeta, the dramaturg, imported from theatrical traditions, becomes a kind of metaphorical (and sometimes literal) dancer herself. She moves. As a dramaturg of motion, Profeta most of all values dramaturgy in motion, hence her book title.

Lemon’s work is fertile ground for Profeta’s meditation on dance dramaturgy because he himself has often been a choreographer in motion. After the radical choice to disband his company in 1995, Lemon turned to intensive research and collaboration as the key modes to develop a series of interrelated projects. Profeta entered the picture in 1997 while still a student dramaturg at the Yale School of Drama. At that time, Lemon began work on the Geography Trilogy, which comprises Geography (1997), Tree (2000), and Come Home Charley Patton (2004). These were followed by How Can You Stay in the House All Day and Not Go Anywhere? (2010). In these works, Lemon asked intercultural questions of identity formation, traveling to West Africa and Asia before turning to the African American history in which his own family’s story is implicated. He collaborated extensively and productively with dancers and musicians from non-Western as well as nonprofessional backgrounds. He also sought out more unusual performance locations (the living rooms of the last living relatives of deceased blues musicians; museum galleries; and, especially perfect for a dramaturg, lecture-demonstration spaces). Additionally, he widened his forms of expression to include essays, talks, books, art installations, and films.

Probing Lemon’s work from inside the process of its development, Profeta offers numerous insights. Since the dramaturg, with notebook in hand, often becomes the
representative of language in the dance world, Profeta hones in first on the continued fear that language and narrative reduce the power of physical expression. She believes that “the fear of the reductive, labeling power of language has not caught up to the last century of fiction writing, which has embraced the limits of linguistic meaning into its field of play, with techniques including the unreliable narrator” (45). Developing tactics of using negative space and noise, insinuation and intimation, key terms and multilingual interactions when it came to spoken word, Lemon, Profeta, and their collaborators arrived at the “freeing” conclusion “that language has the playful power to redirect and misdirect” (45). Similarly, narrative need not block access to “that elusive sense of presence” in the “electric now” of dance. Instead, it “is fruitfully impossible to sustain” immediacy outside of narrative (59). The now “eventually syncopates and spawns a narrative of how we entered or exited that particular state of grace.” This inevitable “narrative understanding” is what “allows perception to make and retain an impact” (59). In both cases, language and text become crucial places in which the dramaturg has work to do: she brings a compositional sensitivity to how words might be used.

Part of why the dramaturg can do this effectively is that she is often a conductor of research alongside the choreographer and dancers. At least this was the case for Profeta in her work with Lemon. Research became “a prompt for conversation” and “an opportunity to locate the potential energy in what is fragmentary and seemingly strange” (70). Thinking of research as a springboard for making, Profeta contends that this approach “helps relieve us of that image of the dramaturg’s research as a preproduction task to be checked off a list, or a completed collection of material to be delivered and taught.” Rather, research becomes “a longer-term creative process to be shared, in
which the dramaturg is an active, perhaps even catalyzing participant, but not the sole responsible party” (70). This may almost threaten to make the dramaturg disposable, but Profeta instead posits that it saturates dance making with dramaturgical energies, fostering what she calls “active archives” (87) that can trigger the movement from collation to creation (71). For instance, when Ralph Lemon returned to his interest in the vernacular African American tradition of the buck dance for Come Home Charley Patton, Profeta brought in a 1987 documentary film by Mike Seeger, Talking Feet: Solo Southern Dance: Flatfoot, Buck, and Tap, for the group to view. They did so, but not to imitate the movement in it. Instead, Lemon urged his dancers to “find their own bucks.” Profeta concludes that “the buck dance thus became the cast’s tool for exploring received notions and cultural memories—those subjective provinces where past collides with present, history with fiction” (78). Thus, dramaturgical research helped to spark personal reworkings of the past rather than predigested wisdom. The dramaturg contributed by providing resources that shaped a guiding metaphor of the devised process. In this way, she too found her own buck within the larger collaborations.

If Profeta glimpses great opportunities for dramaturgical contributions when it comes to language and research, she is more hesitant about the dramaturg’s traditional role as first audience member or “outside eye.” Instead, Profeta is more interested in what André Lepecki calls the “invisible ghosts” of the audience that start to intrude on the creative process. She adds to this notion the idea of a “mutual haunting” in “the moment of spectatorship” when “the art-makers also become ghosts to the audience” (99). These specters across the lines of spectatorship can be vexing to deal with, particularly in terms of who gets to speak for whom: can Profeta speak for particular audiences authentically, or is her own identity a limiting factor? Ultimately, however, the idea of mutual haunting offers Profeta a sense of emancipation: the dramaturg herself can dance across the proscenium, free to contribute multiple perspectives from within or outside the performance. Sometimes her work involves helping the dance makers achieve an internal rigor and consistency that enables enriched receptions by an audience; sometimes it means advocating for tactics that encourage the uneasy experience of what Susan Manning calls “cross viewing,”3 or the heightening of awareness by audience members of the differences of identity among them in viewing a work (particularly around issues of race) (117); sometimes her responses create some new direction in the process unanticipated by all, most of all herself. In the end, the dramaturg does not seek to represent the audience or the creators as much as to mediate between them, adding sparks to the mix, energizing the encounter between the two.

If Profeta resists the placement of the dramaturg in the role of surrogate for the audience, she cultivates the intersection of dramaturgical expertise with questions of movement that are at the heart of dance making. These might seem, at first, to be solely the precinct of the choreographer, but Profeta contends that a dramaturg can use her literacy in interpreting movement vocabularies through systems such as Laban analysis.
to “apprehend a richness of the ‘how’” of movement. This “holds potential for even more” realization of “richness across the body or bodies in motion . . . or utter stillness.” Analyzing movement with a perceptive literacy allows the dramaturg “to reflect . . . observation back in dialogue with the choreographer” so that a dance can achieve the precision and intensity required to deliver information and feeling most effectively (158). At the same time, the dramaturg can lead the way in the ongoing effort to discover fresh and innovative movement by purposefully abandoning her knowledge. When helping Lemon and his cast develop the wild Wall/Hole section of How Can You . . . ? Profeta points out that she “had to surrender my previously established competencies” as a dramaturg. This “reiterated . . . that the most urgent aspect of the dramaturg’s job—her own source of motion—is to continually deskill and reskill her own faculties of perception, and to avoid carrying forward the competencies gained by a previous project, or even a previous moment, as a prescriptive blueprint for the next” (166).

In her final chapter, Profeta turns to the intercultural aspects of dance as an embodied cultural form. Because Lemon became interested in altering his own choreographic habits through extended encounters with dancers from other places, contexts, and people, his work grew deeply intercultural. This led Profeta to grapple with the difficult ethics of these collaborations and exchanges. She most fascinatingly relates Lemon’s daring interest in having a farmer-musician from the Yunnan Province in rural China, Mr. Li, sing and play the sanxian, a plucked string instrument, in blackface. Since it sounded to the choreographer as if Mr. Li were making the sounds of “an old black man in the South” playing the banjo, Lemon wanted to “make blatant not just the comparison he was hearing but also how wrong it was—highlighting and making a point of the artificiality of the imposition” (197). But try as they might, Lemon and Profeta and various translators could never confirm that Mr. Li fully understood the gesture. Therefore, this left open troubling questions about intercultural consent. Ambiguous as Lemon’s intercultural efforts were, they nonetheless were examples of what Patrice Pavis deems the value of risky “inter-corporeal work” (204). As Profeta explains:

I can verify that the political and historical implications of intercorporeal exchange were often felt in Geography and Tree’s rehearsal rooms. Frequently work on a tricky flight of dancing would spawn yet one more involved cast discussion about the dancers’ reasons for dancing, the tensions between individual and group, the notion of “freedom,” the residues of colonialism, or the connections between dance and spirituality. These topics bubbled up easily from just below the surface of the daily work, because they were so often implicit in the reasons for which one moved this way instead of that. As dramaturg, I felt that it was my job to acknowledge the power of effective intercorporeal exchange, recognize when we were in the midst
of that sort of work, figure out how to support that mode and keep us in the midst of it as long as possible, and document the impassioned dialogues, awkward tensions, and periodic epiphanies that extended from the time we spent there. (204–5)

Even Mr. Li found a way across the boundaries of cultural difference, surprising everyone one day during the making of Tree by suddenly starting to sing along with an old blues song by the famous Delta slide guitarist and singer Robert Johnson. “The potential of this surprise rang out crystal clear,” Profeta remembers. “There was no contest; all agreed: this would be the final moment of the piece, hauntingly conveying both understanding and misunderstanding across a cultural gulf” (209).

From engagements with language and text to research to audience to movement to interculturalism, the relational work of dance dramaturgy becomes, for Profeta, something messy, impure, and often problematic—and yet, in its way, dance dramaturgy marks for her a pure gold standard of theatrical experience. It achieves both creative accomplishment and critical abstraction; it becomes a means of contributing to concrete artistic works that also crystallize larger stakes about identity, society, and being alive in the contemporary world. Dance dramaturgy even offers a quiet kind of resistance to the atomization of knowledge through specialization. “In a culture full of specialists,” Profeta argues, “dramaturgy offers one of the last refuges for the obstinate generalist” (xii). In a world of routinization, it sets its sights on the work of wide-ranging exploration. As Profeta puts it, dramaturgy “offers a field of activity for those who would like nothing more than to engage, repeatedly, in what the education field has dubbed ‘project-based learning’—to kindle a fascination with a set of questions, around the formation of an impending event, and then stoke that fascination by approaching it from as many different angles, as many different knowledge bases, as are possibly relevant (and a few that aren’t, for good measure)” (xii). While this oddly mir-
rors, indeed exemplifies, a broader transition to the economic insecurities of a precarious “creative class,” Profeta is less focused on an approach that links dance to structural issues of labor than the close-up experiences of identity politics as they run through choreographic creation and movement performance.

For Profeta, dance dramaturgy provides a means of direct encounters with themes that fascinate, as well as with people driven to investigate these fascinations with body and soul. In writing about her dramaturgical experiences, she provides an illuminating study of Ralph Lemon’s powerful work. So, too, she is among the first to probe the theoretical issues of dramaturgy as an emergent practice within dance making. “A renewable curiosity is the dramaturg’s main stock-in-trade,” Profeta proposes (xii), and she herself has written a book that, as it pivots between a specific collaboration and the larger developing field of dance dramaturgy, repeatedly remakes motion into something to think about.

Notes

2. See, for example, Pil Hansen and Darcey Callison, eds., *Dance Dramaturgy: Modes of Agency, Awareness, and Engagement* (New York: Springer, 2015).