

John Jasperse in the Bay Area: Gaps, Misuse, and the Possibility of Thick Description

by Mary Armentrout

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John Jasperse is a choreographer known as: Cool. Brainy. Provocative. Naked. Virtuosoic. Transgressive. Austere. Opaque. Difficult. Formal. Experimental. Critical. Ironic. Oblique. Pensive. Part of the witty, cerebral downtown New York dance scene. One of the most successful contemporary American choreographers of the last fifteen years, who tours and works all over the globe, and yet someone not seen much in the Bay Area. Jasperse arrives in town to premiere “Misuse liable to prosecution” at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts from April 2-4. I am glad we will experience Jasperse’s incredibly complex and beautiful work first hand, and at the same time, I fear that many will experience some of the difficulty I do when I run head long into his work with my own expectations operating in full force.

As a local choreographer myself, steeped in the expectations and customs of the Bay Area scene, I will attempt to track how I unpack his work to get at the sumptuous riches lurking just below that “austere” surface. First, three interconnected aspects of his movement creation:

1. An ambivalent relationship to “dancing”

There are many pleasures in the pure movement material of Jasperse’s work—I know plenty of people who are delighted by the sheer beauty and sophistication of his choreography. But for me, more is going on than just elegant movement creation, and that is where the interest lies. From a choreographic construction point of view, his work is a sleek synthesis of four components: 1) An extreme articulation of body parts and joints; 2) From a release technique point of view, an audacious and complete mapping between two or more bodies (a specific usage of partner work, related to, but nonetheless unlike the contact improvisation that I see on the West Coast); 3) A self-conscious use of what strikes me as Cunningham style “dance” movement; and 4) A tendency to push all of these kinds of movement to extremes of duration or execution to create what he calls “transformative physical experiences.”

Some examples from Jasperse’s previous work: A solo on high forced arches in a lunge lasts so long that the performer’s legs are visibly shaking by the end. A duet that only explores hand joint movements. A high velocity duet where the point of contact for almost everything, from gentle caresses to full body throws, is the neck. Another duet for two naked men, almost always in contact, but almost never facing or looking at each other.

At the same time, there is a tremendous tension or polarized relationship between dancey movement and non-movement. There is hard-to-execute movement that you recognize as “dance,” and there is also unpretty, unformed or deformed, sloppy, and “nothing” movement. Jasperse somehow manages to move back and forth between these two effortlessly, without valuing one more than the other, and therefore coming up with a fusion of movements that seem wholly human but unlike dance forms I have seen before. I find it beautiful, not pretty, but beautiful. This creates an exciting inner tension in the structure of the choreography because the seamless shifting between these two types of movement calls into question the usual valuation of “dancey” over “non-dancey” movements.

2. An opacity of the self

This brings me to a related notion which Jasperse calls the opacity of dance. As he sees it, dance happens in bodies that are looked at by other bodies. There is a distinct difference in the experience of the bodies doing the dancing and the bodies doing the watching. Even if the performers have a “transformative physical experience” as they perform, what do the watching bodies experience? No

matter what, there is always a difference, a gap, a layer in between; the watcher does not have the same experience as the doer. Jasperse is acutely aware of this opacity between performer and watcher, and between performer and his own sense of self. He utilizes this buildup of potential multiple distortions as a concrete metaphor for the notion that we humans can't know another's experience or fully communicate our own. Yes, some amount of communication and understanding is surely possible, but gaps and distortions remain. When I dig deeper into how his work addresses this aspect of human communication, Jasperse's duet work, which can seem stand-offish and simply formal, becomes a poignant description of the ways we can't and don't touch each other.

3. Irony and the use of critical stance

The use of a critical stance flows very clearly from this awareness of a gap. If you are noticing the gap between performer and watcher, you can't take things like simple emotional expression or transparent communication at face value. In this regard, Jasperse's work is a complex critique of the simplicity of expression. Jasperse is often accused of seeming detached, of directing his performers to be vacant or emotionless, which I have experienced in his dances. However, there is a deeper experience of the inability to breach the gap, which is palpably present and is a compelling aspect of his work. With this in mind, his work becomes an elegant, heart-rending, full expression of one aspect of the human condition: our inability to be completely transparent, the inevitable opacity of experience. This opacity seems to be one of the major themes of postmodern culture and philosophy, and Jasperse has created a great method for embodying it. He has remarked that he finds a lack of irony in art suspect—I think this is why.

In examining just Jasperse's construction of movement, we already see several layers of meaning and ambiguity building up. But Jasperse is a restless mind, working on many fronts at once—which brings me to the big themes and grand topics that his work is often about. Looking at descriptions of his work, I find that they cover topics ranging from the demise of contemporary dance, to the audience's perception as co-creator of the piece, to defining truth as a culture. Pretty broad and ambitious topics. And truly, he does, in his same careful, embedded way of working, manage to seamlessly integrate large topics into his works. For example, in "just two dancers," the performers dance most of the piece on separate platforms in the audience, limiting what is seen. Each audience member is given a small hand mirror so that they can "see" the other performer, if they chose to, giving the audience an active role in what they experience. This is not a big topic simply laid on top of pretty dancing, this is meaning grown out of the basic constraints of the piece.

So what about "Misuse liable to prosecution"? It seems an obvious choice to play in the Bay Area, since it is, at least on the surface, a green piece—a matter dear to our hearts. According to the press description, this work is "defined by the premise that we can buy nothing. All sets, costumes, and props must be found, borrowed or stolen." However, if we look more closely, it's clear that the use of this constraint is not motivated simply by a concern for the environment. It serves as a metaphor for the artist's place in American society, which feels to Jasperse like a marginalized, unsupported and unvalued place where we make work out of whatever scraps we can piece together. Jasperse creates a wonderland on stage out of discarded materials: a giant hanging forest of recycled hangers and piles of empty plastic water bottles. In one excerpt, dancers interact with a bare mattress: Mattress as buffer, plaything, and weapon. The bare discarded mattress on the street as a symbol of vulnerability, a place of intimacy. I am itching to see the whole piece and how he stitches up this complex weave in his cerebral, witty, and very satisfying fashion.

I admit, it takes me a moment to recalibrate my Bay Area eyes so that his work opens up for me. I

examine what in myself and my creative style makes Jasperse's dances seem austere and reserved: Is it my tendency to reach for louder emotional colors that makes Jasperse's opaque emotions seem pastel to me? Or my reliance on autobiography to mine the depths, and the illusions of depth, of the "self," versus his choice to stay within the layer of physiology? Is my stumbling caused by differences in personal style, or by differences in the contexts of our dance scenes? I think it is both. (This is a second kind of gap—the gap of context.) To draw this out further: does my living and working in a community that values, say, autobiography and the desire to grapple with big social issues—two potential Bay Area hallmarks—support my own creative tendencies in those directions and hence make it harder for me to be open to different ways of working and valuing different goals? Yes, of course. Perhaps this seems obvious, but I think the subtly pervasive way that context frames what we see is incredibly powerful, and if we can work with this in self-aware ways, it can be a potent tool in helping us see ourselves and our reactions to others in the most interesting ways.

When I do find a way into his work, a bigger horizon opens up, which allows me to see the possibility of a more complicated conversation about dance in America, and contemporary dance in general. I would love for the conversation that Bay Area artists are engaged in to include Jasperse's beautiful and sophisticated work with its layers of self-awareness embedded in its own formalistic workings. It seems clear that the Bay Area needs to keep abreast of the most sophisticated work happening in other dance centers, not only in New York, so that our dance community can thrive. Sometimes I suspect I am in the minority with this view. Local dance presenters seem unwilling to gamble on edgy, less established out-of-town artists. Perhaps if more of the dance community showed interest and enthusiasm for this work, it would make its way here more often.

What do you think? Are you planning on going to this show? Have I helped contextualize Jasperse's work? Or have I convinced you that it won't be to your taste or worth your time? I hope not. If you go, what do your Bay Area eyes see? Mind the gaps, and enjoy the show.

Mary Armentrout is a choreographer, performer, teacher, and sometime writer on dance. She organizes the Dance Discourse Project, an ongoing series of artist-curated discussions on topics of interest to the Bay Area dance community. She would love to hear your thoughts at ma@maryarmentroutdancetheater.com