

WHO DID
THE

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CHOREOGRAPHY

A text by
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*And let each day be a loss to us on which we did not dance once!
And let each truth be false to us which was not greeted
by one laugh!*

— Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*
(tr. Adrian Del Caro)

New Movements for Old Bodies is the companion piece to another work titled *Old Movements for New Bodies*, the latter referring to movements Marco Berrettini taught to trainee dancers twenty-five years ago as part of a project of which the new work is a remake. Since the disco piece *Sorry, do the tour!* (2001)*Melk Prod.'s dance ventures have been collaborations involving the company as a whole. So *New Movements for Old Bodies* is a collective work with each performer providing creative input in response to texts and subjects for improvisation suggested by Berrettini; this group activity is then rounded off by the choreographer's assemblage of sequence and sound.

Discontinuity is developed via a process of concentration—or shifts—of meaning, a crazy succession of moving images that comes across as an exercise in channel-hopping. These are images of a dance that references the movie and TV screen, with the specular wall of the theatre space no longer just a mirror, but a screen as well. Thus the company's striving to displace the spectator's point of view by demonstrating the unstable status of stage and auditorium is not solely intended to point up the irrelevance of which side of the representational mirror we are on, and so assert that "we are all mirrors of the world"; it also presupposes that the moving body of the subject is a screen. And that body is shot through

with the schizophrenia of a society bent on ever more movement and ever more speed: a screen-driven society for a subject whose screen stage seems to have merged with that of the mirror. Or better still, to adopt the nihilistic hypotheses of Baudrillard, for whom there is no longer any mirror or any stage, because there is no longer even any subject, the subject being no longer that of the paranoid construct nor that of the hysterical *mise en scène*, but that of our schizophrenic present in which the loss of reality is all the more an overexposure to the transparency of the world: "Deprived of any stage and unable to put up any resistance, he can no longer produce the boundaries of his own existence, can no longer produce himself as mirror. He becomes pure screen, pure surface of absorption and resorption for networks of influence."¹ Dissolution of the ego and screen-body imbued with the obscene, with a false etymology for that which cannot be staged, but which nonetheless destroys the stage, which permeates the hyperreal Baudrillard world of telematics stripped of its sealed-off subject. But humanity is safe: the thirst for spectacle has replaced the instinct for preservation, explains Baudrillard, speaking of the authority of spectacle as the exercise of a power of dissuasion: his example is the Chernobyl disaster as the crucial event behind a new awareness; this, at least, is reassuring, because if man blew the planet up there would be nobody left to watch the spectacle, not even a panda—but then again, maybe...

Using dance as performative method, Berrettini's spectacle becomes a schizo cabaret, a delirious rant about the world and the way it is represented: "What is delirium? It is the unconscious move into a historical social field. Out of delirium come races, continents, cultures."² The immorality of history—of stories, all the little stories that make up Berrettini's dance corpus—is to approach the schizophrenic process as singling out one kind of mad person (the autistic), so as to better neglect the second (the artist); singling out a screen-body which can only ignore the self-creative activity presented by the dance: the delirium of birth and death, the proof of one's existence and the absence of individuality, a schizo thought-structure as will to power rather than desire for power, a dance whose movement is dancing rather than danced.

LIBIDO DOMINANTI ³

Anyone watching *New Movements for Old Bodies* is having his visual awareness tested by dance happening at the outer reaches of reality and fiction, of simulated improvisation and organised clumsiness. The space is broken up by the successive entries of the characters and the way they perform the same actions at the same time. The potent purism of the performance derives from its use of fragments, the sequencing of the solos and ensemble work and of phrases that coil up or break out into logical absurdity, and the expressive effect of music that induces changes of atmosphere even as the physical rhythm is punctuated by bursts of sound. The

music becomes a source of space and action, with the sound track—instrumental pieces, songs, sound indices, recorded voices—playing its part in making the stage space a locus for temporal variations and spatial tensions. Bodies spinning faster and faster, bodies tumbling, bodies displacing other bodies from below, bodies manipulated, bodies falling, a body eating itself: this is a performance made of unique moments, sudden snatches of burlesque that send narrative continuity haywire, throw down the gauntlet to rationality, morality and gravity in any shape or form, and transform dancers into metaphysical cabaret acrobats. Berrettini's choreography functions as scraps of representation, a bits-and-pieces drama in which anything suggestive of a story is immediately challenged by some fresh intrusion.

The sequences find their order and disorder in an interweaving of body and sense, body and nonsense, shreds of stories slipped in among the characters and the dance steps: the mechanical comings and goings of a cleaner, colliding with the walls of the performance space like a Playmobil toy then suddenly metamorphosing; the anger of a fake kabuki dancer, fanning himself as he hums *Madame Butterfly* at the bottom of a plastic swimming pool before suddenly splitting into sexual conflict; the gesticulations of a mad transvestite who has his own part in the piece, but whose claim to be twenty is a fiction—he "doesn't give a damn" who knows it, either—and who briefly becomes the master of ceremonies before plunging into a euphorically spastic seizure. There's also a vaguely louche character with no part at all, who shakes hands with members of the audience; and a pretentious hot dog with an American accent who swallows the ends of his sentences, stroking his body in front of a silent chorus as he tries to induce them to lick and bite him—a fat red sausage nostalgic for his European roots—like some new Eucharist in sneakers. Not to mention a plant/microphone, a panda sitting on a circular platform set on a pole, and a blonde who sings about her love of chocolate after reciting an equation: "If A is success in life, $A = X + Y + Z$, X being work, Y leisure and Z keeping your mouth shut". The equation is then taken up by a second blonde and they launch into a dumb-blonde dialogue, simpering and tossing their hair as if they're in a shampoo commercial: "The younger generation should be brought up to think independently, so as to have an independent attitude to political issues" and "Without the individual's spiritual and moral autonomy, the community is an automaton with no possibility of creative construction" and "The force of gravity isn't to blame for people falling in love."

Movements borrowed from musical comedy, gestures from cartoons and presentation from TV variety: sources that make the choreography a spectacle in which tragedy mingles with burlesque and frivolity with gravity, in which characters and dance figures are one and actors, dancers and the individual all come together. Here dance puts itself on show, becomes a subject for performance through a certain

¹ Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, tr. Bernard and Caroline Schutze, *Semiotext(e)*, 1988. This translation is by John Tittensor.

² Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, tr. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane, University of Minnesota Press, 1983. This translation is by John Tittensor.

³ The title *New movements for old bodies* also covers two other pieces on the same programme, by members of the *Melk prod. company: the solo *Sweet Savagery* by Chiara Gallerani and the screening *b'anal world*, by Gianfranco Poddighe. The Marco Berrettini piece was publicised as *Libido dominanti*.



Marco Berrettini / *Meik Prod., *New Movements for Old Bodies*, 2003, Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers. Photo by Nicolas Losson

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Witold Gombrowicz,
Pornographia, tr. Alastair
 Hamilton, Grove Press,
 1994, p. 8.

theatricality of the dancing body as it makes play with the basic principles of stage presence: animality, mechanics and the human. This is a spectacle about dance, dance about spectacle. Dance as a generic term, the dance that makes dance of us. As a presentation of a presentation, *New Movements for Old Bodies* is a representative chamber made up of sounds and surfaces on which dance parodies dance in a tragicomic spectacle more tinged with cynicism than irony. Dance as spectacle combines with the decadence of the spectacular in the presentation of a dancing, singing body that laughingly topples the idols, signalling—to Guy Debord—that we can mock the idiocy the spectacular would have us defer to, because laughing dilates the bodily orifices and humour, as Wittgenstein so aptly put it, is not a state of mind but a worldview. Humour is always freshness: it lightens the load of existence, it is the expression of someone who has witnessed the primal scene and delights in a spectacle of which no detail escapes him; this is the ironic detachment regarding idols that the cynic stands on its head.

Dance endlessly redefines the notion of the danced body, of the body of the individual in society and the problematics of its relationship with the social and political scene. This is

dance as anthropology of the visual, of cultural man: since the notions of high and low have no value, everything that becomes sign is transformed into food for thought. By hijacking these theme park characters and making them dance—like the soft-toy panda, simply a woman dancer murmuring over and over to the audience that she is perfection itself—Berrettini's *mise en scène* does not replicate the global infantilisation of the world of spectacle, but rather reverses passive infantilisation, turning it into affirmative immaturity. This is immaturity in the sense intended by Gombrowicz when he says that every human being strives towards the absolute, the truth and maturity, while remaining unaware of that other goal, of man's need for incompleteness, imperfection, inferiority and youthfulness: "Immaturity is not always innate or imposed by others. There is also an immaturity which culture batters us against when it submerges us and we do not manage to hoist ourselves up to its level. We are 'infantilised' by all 'higher' forms. Man, tortured by his mask, fabricated secretly, for his own usage, a sort of 'subculture': a world made out of the refuse of a higher world of culture, a domain of trash, immature myths, inadmissible passions..."⁴

This world is a representative chamber in which bod-

ies dance. *Libido dominant*. Libido and politics. Politics as inherent in the aesthetic of dance and libido as affirmation of life. A libidinal economy of the body staged as alternation and coexistence of intensities of drama and dance, sound and music—a cabaret stage on which bodies wheel around a metal pole. The critical aspect of dance is always the critical approach to the subject on stage—polarised, castrated, alienated. So perhaps we must imagine the pole that cuts off the subject as the polarisation of the peepshow stage, where dance is not truth laid bare but rather a denied castration, for the moment the g-string comes off we realise that there is never anything to see. Contrary to the strip-tease performer and her absence of desire, the dancer is exposed to all the metamorphoses, delivered up to all possible imaginable forms of seduction.

In *New Movements for Old Bodies*, the strip-tease performer is disguised as a panda who has retreated to the top of her pole, descending to rub herself erotically against it just after the death of a cleaner; to dance the end of representation of the truth in quest of a new logic of sense and sensation. We have art, said Nietzsche, so that we shall not die of the truth: the truth as original pain, consequence of the inflicted individuation that condemns humanity to simulation, revealing itself to the man who scrupulously avoids seeking it out, feigning it or brushing dementedly against it. Jean-François Lyotard, who brought humour to his exploration of the tragic, often used the libidinal economy concept to point out “the passionate element in political economy and, secondarily, the political element in the passions.”⁵ The libidinal economy—Lyotard considered his essay a philosophical blind alley, but it remains a handsome presentation of the metamorphoses of Eros and Dionysus—is a political economy based on the principle that desire cannot be appropriated by knowledge or power. His intuition of a floating energy flowing through both subject and community has its roots in the pagan afflatus—the birth of tragedy—that makes the body an energy-body composed of ebb and flow, surface and depth, a Möbius strip folding and twisting in a theatrical space. Lyotard’s interpretation of the origins of representation arises out of the separation between the theatrical and the political, out of the “stage mix of circus and political assembly” that was Roman theatre. The birth of the theatre also involves the Freudian *fort da* notion of the infant using a wooden reel to replay the disappearance and reappearance of the mother. To this split, polarised subject, Lyotard brings movement: the mad movement of the pole, whose slowing down unreels a presentation area. The theatrical space takes shape when the spinning pole slows down and the intensities weaken: then comes the establishing of the stage and the narrative time frame, the time frame of representation.

The mast of a drunken boat or a pole in a cabaret? In *New Movements for Old Bodies* layering of the action brings reciprocal crossover among the characters, yet there is no communication until they all come together, wheeling around

the pole to the sound of heady music. This gyratory movement forms the presentation of the work and the dancers, with a contribution from the non-character, the actor with no part who is there solely, as he says himself, “to dance a little”. With a sudden leap the dancers accelerate and spread out, the panda is taken hostage by the gun-brandishing fake character as he solemnly quotes the venerable buto dancer Kazuo Ohno, now virtually withdrawn into a permanent state of immobile dance: “On the threshold of death one sifts through the happy moments of one’s whole life...Here I want to dance, dance, dance, dance the life of wild grass. I see wild grass, I am wild grass, I become one with the universe.” Taking command of the stage, he hustles the dancers into line with a foam-rubber gun as if they were suspects, and one by one they take a pace forward to deny responsibility for the choreography: “I know this piece, it’s by Bob Fosse.”

LIZA MINNELLI’S THEORY

The movements taken from the gestural vocabulary of American musical comedy imply the notion of the musical body. Musical comedy requires the performer to stockpile the various means of expression: the dramatic body of the actor and the physical body of the dancer come together in a register-body which—in the case of Berrettini—has a capacity to disremember corporal awareness to the point of no longer knowing how to act or dance. How to act badly or dance badly. Forgetting and clumsiness are just as important as the major acting and dancing skills—as is the non-knowledge input provided by the non-actor and non-dancer for *Melk Prod.’s projects. What signals the indisputable link between choreography as performance and choreography specifically intended for the cinema—between the production of dancing bodies and their reproduction in movement-images, between production surface and projection surface—is music, the common factor in these two forms of dance. The uniqueness of cinema musical comedy is that it allows dance to outstrip fiction and music to take command of the image, so as to dynamise the narrative. Unlike the speaking body of the actor, and unlike the sound-tied-to-visuals nexus, the dancing and singing body is one engendered by music, with the movement of dance reversing the specifically cinematic sound/image relationship.⁶ On Berrettini’s stage, power constantly slides from the music, which sets the bodies singing or dancing, into the work of the actor and his double, in a smooth choreography of bodies and sounds.

Dancer, choreographer and director, Bob Fosse headed the 1970s comeback of the cinematic origins of musical comedy. Fosse is to musical comedy what Caravaggio was to painting, his comedies marked by a realism that restored the superb, squeaky clean body of the dancer to its flesh and sweat version. At the choreographer’s request the dancers in *Cabaret*, Hollywood’s 1972 take on the decadent Berlin of the thirties, let their armpit hair grow back in what Michel Chion noted as “a symbolic way of saying that he wanted to make

⁵ Jean-François Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, tr. Iain Hamilton Grant, Indiana University Press, 1993. This translation by John Tittensor.

⁶ As Rick Altman demonstrates in *The American Film Musical*, Indiana University Press, 1989, quoted in Michel Chion *La Comédie musicale*, Paris, Cahiers du cinéma, 2002.

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Peter Sloterdijk,
La Mobilisation infinie,
French translation by
Hans Hildenbrand, Paris,
Christian Bourgois, 2000,
p. 202. This translation
by John Tittensor.

musical comedies redolent with the funkiness of perspiration, alcohol, the sexual humours and even the hospital.” The easy sensuality of the gesture blends with the gravity of the statement, desire and politics blend with spectacle. We recall, in *Cabaret*, the face of master of ceremony Joel Grey, distorted by makeup and a stage mirror: this character is the liaison between real fiction and stage fiction, welcoming us and his audience into a flawlessly splendid haven of warmth where sex, power, perversion and seduction commingle. “Divine decadence”, comments Liza Minnelli, for whom “life is a cabaret”. This reflected face, then, is set against an overture reprised at the end of the film, when the camera slides over the reflected, distorted image of an audience including several Nazis, harbingers of another spectacle: that of the history of modern civilisation. Who is the audience here? Who did the choreography?

The Bob Fosse backstage musical allows the strategic power of the musical numbers to be linked—in terms of both action and form—with a skilled amalgam of scenes in which cinematic movement is reproduced as specific, supreme moments of dance movement (following Deleuze’s gloss on Bergson’s definition of movement). Musical comedy makes play with differing levels of representation: on/off stage; diegetic and non-diegetic music and audience; and the actual audience watching the screen, either distanced by the camera eye or plunged into the heart of things. In his most personal film, *All That Jazz* (1979), Fosse offers us the sick, aging body of a choreographer (Roy Scheider) taking stock of his failings. The production mingles intimate theatre (the representation box) and the TV set (the representation chamber), surgical images and disco numbers, rehearsal room and projection room, mirrors and screens. The choreographer who looks at himself in the mirror every morning and raps out “Let’s get this show on the road” finally meets his end, but still searching for the ultimate take, cursing the heavens as he tries to find out if God likes musical comedies: this is the spectacle of a whole life spent cheating “to the point where he didn’t know anymore where play-acting started and reality stopped... For him the only reality is death.”

In choosing between two theories—Adorno’s “the whole is the false” and Liza Minnelli’s “life is a cabaret”—Peter Sloterdijk has no hesitation: “When directly compared with Adorno’s theorem, Minelli’s seems to have the advantage in that it sees irony as an integral part of the world and does not presuppose a subject who might add the irony in.”⁷ Faced with the depression of a post-modernity that can find no original way of formulating its desolation, and with the absolutism of history and socialisation, Sloterdijk opts for an alternative critique of modernity: denouncing the fake permanent revolution represented by mobilisation, he develops a theory critical of progress as presented by modern societies and suggests an alternative ethics based on the crucial difference between mobility and mobilisation. Aiming beyond a mere critique of alienation, the kinetic language he uses leaves room for a con-

sideration of something spurned by Marx: the underlying kinetic process of modernity as movement towards more movement, where the original process of accumulation now takes place not in economic but kinetic terms, producing an original accumulation of subjectivity as self-movement towards movement. The subjectivisation process—the self-birthing of the subject spoken of by Sloterdijk, who sees activity as a striving to bring oneself into the world—is the subject’s self-realisation on the world stage.

Now, if we grant dance—and Berrettini’s in particular—a (necessarily political) role, does not that role consist in revealing this constantly self-birthing body, this dancing, no more than transitional body, a body whose least movement becomes a vital one? Rather than the *joie de vivre* of the musical comedy, Berrettini’s dance—to be understood as theatre that is danced, sung, mimed, etc., as a notion of contemporary dance so sweeping it can no longer be reduced to a single term, a definition that would abort the meaning we attribute to the simple fact of showing a body on a stage—is a form of gaiety whose insolence expects no recognition. On the political stage the actor is now no more than disembodied, on the same footing as the character without a part, the one whose body is manipulated by the panda into a pose for an audibly clicking camera while the rest of the troupe parodies a musical comedy scene by making us listen to dance via the sound of hands slapping on thighs. To raise the issue of the political and the aesthetic is to reflect on the notion of the felt; and then, via our different singularities, to come to an agreement on what fascinates us in symbolic abasement and the loss of experience—not like spectators at a peepshow, but as on a stage when the dancers roll side by side as their bodies bear the panda to the pole, forming a community of sentient beings who have forgotten that man has invented the wheel.

Movement is always of the present and of duration, it is that which circulates between forms, indivisible or simply changing its nature. These new movements for old bodies express this permanent urge towards the new and the torment of no longer producing originality or reaching self-completion, of no longer being able to say that life is a cabaret or dance the life of the wild grass, of no longer having the mobility needed to look good on stage: all these difficulties have to be overcome by the choreographer, who sets bodies dancing so as to make society think not only about its political future, but also about its future-as-panda and its plant/microphone. The mobility in question here is also that of Sloterdijk’s theory of movement as a civilising force, when he speculates about the credibility of political discourse and the possible role of a Taoist afflatus in political thinking: “Here speaks the youthful sprightliness of the aquarium keeper with all the old ichthyic burden of reality: end of the world war, beginning of intercontinental eroticism!”

New Movements for Old Bodies has no beginning as the cast is already on stage to welcome the public and the title sequence only comes later; nor should we forget all those little begin-

nings scattered among the sequences. There's no end, either, because it's delayed by a reprised sequence, a remake of the hostage-taking scene in which the madman takes command but the victim is none other than the plant/microphone: this close batters the audience with the high-volume sound track of a 1970s Charles Wilp commercial for Afri-Cola—a “brutishly German” affair, says Berrettini, who seems to know what he's talking about. Ever since man became subject and the world became image, representation has been the ontological foundation of modernity (Heidegger!). Between the world from which we come and the one in which we live, lies the whole ontological difference dimension, the theatre of an entire life compressed into the duration of a musical comedy. “Things only come round once,” sings Liza Minnelli in *Cabaret*. “The fear of death is the most unjustified fear of all, for there's no danger of an accident for a dead person,” retorts the blonde in *New Movements for Old Bodies*.

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New Movements for Old Bodies, directed by Marco Berrettini / *Melk Prod., shown at the Laboratoires on November 13-14-15, 2003. Production *Melk Prod., Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, le Conseil général de la Seine-Saint-Denis, Pro-Helvetia, with the support of the Ministry of Culture and Communication (DRAC Île-de-France — aide aux compagnies chorégraphiques).