Choreography On the Couch: 
the Role of Psychological Intervention in the Choreographic Process of Incarna

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Abstract 
This paper will discuss the transactional nature and creative outcomes of the psychological intervention in the choreographic process of Incarna.1 The intervention, which was carried out by Dr. Elizabeth Shelton, aimed to analyze the emergent choreographic materials and the participants’ understanding of the generative imagery driving the process. It was anticipated that the intervention would productively deepen all the participants’ understandings of their relationship with the imagistic basis and emerging form of the work, and act as a change-agent within the choreographic process.

Keywords: psychological intervention; practise-based research in the creative arts; contemporary choreographic processes.

Introduction 
My recent major choreographic work Incarna, explored ideas of severance from others, dislocation from place, and the uncertainty of our apprehension of evident reality. This paper will discuss the outcomes of the psychological intervention in the choreographic process of Incarna.

The intervention, which was carried out by psychologist Dr. Shelton, was specifically designed to modify aspects of my choreographic practice that I deemed to have become entrenched, and which were likely to produce predictable choreographic outcomes. It was one of several change strategies embedded in the process.2 It should be noted that the intervention was jointly designed by Dr. Shelton (hereafter Beth) and me to be carried out within the parameters of the overarching research.

Beth's work as a psychologist is predated by her extensive career as a performer, choreographer and artistic director in the field of contemporary dance. She was therefore able to bring an insightful and empathetic approach to the research. This paper is presented with her endorsement.

Through the intervention I hoped to gain a better understanding of how the dancers processed and embodied the generative imagery that was driving the choreography, and how these new understandings might shape the ensuing process. It was anticipated that the intervention would productively deepen all the participants' understanding of their relationship with the imagistic basis of the choreography.

Beth's role encompassed observation of emergent choreographic form, structured discursive analysis, and interpretation of the process. She also led improvisational workshops based on the generative images. As such she acted as a change agent within the process.

Care was taken to focus the intervention on the nature of the work rather than on the participants’ psychological profiles. Personal revelations were made in the context of their relationship to the process, and their perceptions of themselves as dance artists operating within that context. Beth describes her role as seeking: 

...to understand the work not only as a complex and evocative set of choreographic decisions realized in highly skilled performance of movement, but as a psychological landscape rich in motivation, emotion and personal association (Shelton, 2005).

Interrogating the Choreographer 
In the first phase of the intervention my operations as choreographer were analysed. In consultation with Beth we attempted to discover the personal associations I might have with the seminal images.

Here I need to describe one of the central aspects of my choreographic methodology. For me, the precursor to choreographic engagement is a felt anticipation of that which might come into existence. This state of choreographic premonition can be triggered by an image, a fragment of text, or by any other stimulus. In such moments I perceive a delicate feeling of shape and movement, and of

1 Incarna was presented as the folio component of my Ph.D. candidature, School of Dance, Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne (2005)

2 There was a reduction from a large ensemble of dancers to just four in order to experiment with generating choreographic complexity on a smaller scale. In the first rehearsal phase I worked discretely with each dancer for an extended period in order to make individualized and characteristic movement for each, rather than using the more conventional contributory workshop mode where movement materials are more shared and blended between the dancers. The extended time frame was deliberate planned to span two years of sporadic intensive rehearsal phases in order to enhance reflection, and maturation within the process. Choreographic works are often completed within tight time constraints.
potential structure that is held lightly on the edge of perception, and often accompanied by visualized abstract form.

As starting points for Incarna I had become attracted to several fragments of text taken from reports of paranormal phenomena. Regardless of the veracity of these stories, they exemplified the notion that space could be uncannily affected by presences or influences that did not belong to the immediate reality. Extra-dimensionality was implied, this being one of the central concerns of the choreographic research.

Two of these the fragments were:

...the restless energy in the old house...3

and

...the fire was caused by a girl being careless with a candle...4

Dialogue with Beth regarding my attraction to the restless energy in the old house revealed a connection to feelings and experiences evoked by our family leaving our home in Launceston, Tasmania where we had lived for fifteen years, to move to Perth, Western Australia for professional reasons. In Launceston, we had painstakingly renovated our Victorian area terrace house over a number of years, and of course felt very connected to our home and to Launceston and its community as well. The sudden move to Perth generated feelings of dislocation, and a loss of the sense of place, all central concepts in the current choreographic endeavour.

Whilst these feelings were painful they were understandable. What I did not expect was the phenomenon, once in Perth, of being regularly invaded by vivid images of our Launceston home almost every time I closed my eyes. It was as if I was hooked up to a mobile video camera travelling into every nook and cranny of the house, and over every surface that I had stripped, sandpapered, plastered and painted. The images were absolutely crystalline, full colour and three-dimensional, and of an intensity unlike anything I have ever experienced before or since.

No attempt was made to have the connection to the Launceston visitations directly influence the current choreographic process. Rather, it seemed that becoming aware of the relationship was sufficiently affective, like an informing background.

I would like to show a video excerpt of the movement generated by exploring the restless energy in the old house. This is from a rehearsal quite early in the process and the dancer is Brett Daffy. (PLAY VIDEO EXCERPT 1)

Similar connections between the six other fragments and my life experiences were also revealed. These realizations further enriched the background environment in which I operated as the choreographer.

There is an axiom in the arts that it can be detrimental to an artist's creativity if they understand too well the sources of their inspiration. The intervention challenged this notion based on the belief that greater awareness can only serve to enhance creativity. Indeed, I think that the more one knows about one's creative drivers and processes, the greater one's apprehension of the complexity and depth of the underlying mystery.

Counselling the Choreography

The broad theoretical approach that underpinned the intervention was based on Beth's interest in the work of psychological theorist and researcher Eugene Gendlin, neurologist Antonio Di Masio and cognitive theorist Seymour Epstein.

In her report Beth states that:

This work supports the concept of a bodily-based pre-conceptual, ongoing, sense-of-things-as-they-happen that co-exists with sequential or logical cognitive processing and influences thinking and behaviour in important ways (Shelton, 2005).

Of central importance was Gendlin's concept of the felt sense.

Regarding her interactions with the dancers Beth states:

I aimed to find methods of observing and intervening in the Incarna process that held the promise of elucidating language-based meanings close to the physical experience of the dance (Shelton, 2005).

Understanding the transaction between body-based and language-based meaning was central to my aim of revealing the interiority of the each dancer's process. I wanted to make palpable the imaginative and associative realms of the work rather than just presenting the more formal outcomes, and this was centred in the nature of the dancers' embodiment.

In one revealing exercise the dancers reported their reactions and responses to Beth immediately after performing the movement. The responses seemed to have a depth and immediacy that may not have survived had a longer period elapsed between moving and speaking, in which time the responses may have been intellectually processed or rationalized, and therefore more divorced from the embodied experience.

Beth’s interactions with the dancers revealed how they related to the imagery being introduced, and their perceptions of the inter-relationships within the process.

I gained important insights into how each individual dancer evoked the metaphorical world of the dance, whether it was more helpful to create an external imaginative world or reference a personalized interior landscape.

One of the dancers states in her journal she that came to think of the ideas and concepts arising out of the intervention as hanging in a dispersed cloud within the creative process (Erskine, 2005).

For one dancer it was sufficient to have the images as a set of available references whilst focusing on the dynamic nuances, aesthetic characteristics and technical challenges of the movement materials. For another, the imagistic basis of the work formed a metaphorical world within which to exist.

3 www.throwpots.com/ectoplasm.htm
4 www.ghoststudy.com/monthly/oct00/chumash.html
The intervention also scrutinized the creative physical transaction between the dancers and me that actually produced the choreography. For some time I had thought that I was not actually demonstrating movement very much to the dancers. Neither was I asking them to generate movement via problem solving tasks. Yet the movement kept evolving on a greater level of complexity and formal definition than I thought could have been achieved by verbal interaction alone.

Beth observed that during rehearsals:

...the choreographer and the dancers sought to establish a shared understanding about what is being aimed for in the movement. Neil worked in close spatially to the dancers, often moving with them, clearly in an empathetic physical relationship (Shelton 2005).

The knowledge that I had been moving in concert with the dancers was a revelation. I had been unconscious of the subtle and intuitive communication between the dancers and me in which choreographic realization occurred.

This promoted a re-examination of proximity and viewpoint that had important ramifications for bringing the work to fruition in a theatre setting. If the work was evolving out of intimate close-range transactions, how would this translate to the more distant audience-to-dancers relationship in the theatre? As the heart of the choreography became more and more located in subtle details and fine nuances of the movement in the micro-spatial range, how would this be made appreciable at a distance?

A change in my proximity to the dancers during rehearsals was required. What became apparent at greater remove was that the intensity and depth of absorption that the process had engendered in the dancers had the effect of drawing the eye into the interiority of their embodiment. Rather than the dancers needing to project forcefully out into space towards a viewer, their intimately and almost privately focused work seemed to provide entrée into the imaginative and experiential realms of their process. The revelation of the interior world of the dancers' processes became Incarna's hallmark.

One short solo in particular epitomized this core aspect, and as such became the touchstone of the work. The Kernel Solo, as it became known, was derived by exploring the other fragment mentioned earlier, namely, the fire was caused by a girl being careless with a candle. Whilst the initial spatial form of the solo was quite large, the feeling for me was that the larger superstructure could have been formed by extrapolating out from the intricate and subtle micro-spatial range movements that existed within it.

Awareness of this multi-dimensionality suggested another possibility. On impulse I asked Delia to work through the solo as if she were inside its larger enveloping form, and to attempt to distil the kernel or essential heart of each movement. This produced a minimal but highly evocative phrase that seemed to embody the essence of the imagery, and also located it in a reflective, time-past realm. Movement appeared to arise unbidden and the delicately initiated gestures vaporized before being fulfilled, investing the material with an intangible quality.

I would like to show a video of the Kernel Solo. This was recorded at the end of the process during the performance season. The dancer is Delia Silvan. (PLAY VIDEO EXCERPT 2)

Whilst I had embedded several change strategies in the choreographic process, it was the psychological intervention that resulted in the most significant shifts in my practise. The intervention revealed the inter-relationship of three realms of activity: the dynamic space in which the movement occurred, the inter-personal connections between the dancers, and the intra-personal world of each dancer's embodiment.

Prior to this project I had choreographed many dances that could be characterised by their formal complexity, albeit strongly informed by abstract expressive handling of humanistic themes. I had now arrived at a place where complexity and expressive richness resided in the finer details of a simpler overarching form, and where the evocative characteristics of the dance resided in the dancers' deeply considered performances, as described by dance reviewer Hillary Crampton (2005).

Another significant change was the move away from the notion of the dancers operating as a unified ensemble striving in concert to achieve the performance of a demanding dance. Whilst this was still essential on one level it was not an evident element of the expressive landscape of the choreography. The associative and definitive characteristics of Incarna relied on the more subtle and specific transactions in which each dancer defined their relationships to the others in the ensemble, and to the work in very individual and particular ways.

Finally, the way in which the dancers inhabited the world of Incarna was an affecting realization of the ineffable heart of a dance born out of ideas of dislocation, severance, and the uncertainty of evident reality.

References

Acknowledgments
Professor Shirley McKechnie OAM, SAHA, Dr. Don Asker, Mr. Robin Grove, Associate Professor Jennifer Kinder, Dr. Elizabeth Shelton, Dr. Catherine Stevens.

Conceiving Connections ARC Linkage dance research project School of Dance, Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne (now the School of Performing Arts, Dance, the Faculty of the VCA and Music, University of Melbourne), with industry partners Australia Council,
MARCS Auditory Laboratories University of Western Sydney, Australian Dance Council-Ausdance Inc., and the Australian Choreographic Centre Canberra.

Dancer/Research assistants Shona Erskine, Brett Daffy, Delia Silvan, Phoebe Robinson, Lee Serle, and Abbie Sherwood.

Music: video excerpt 1: Louis Andriessen, video excerpt 2: David Lang, Myles Mumford.

Citation details for this article: