

Writing about dance

Personal musings about dance and other related topics

Sara Marasso

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Dance is often characterized as an ephemeral art; it communicates on a non-verbal level, its images are fleeting and cannot be recalled in the same way as a piece of music. It is a medium that can all too easily elude fixity in the senses after the end of a performance, even though the memory has scanned it all. So what happens to our memory of dance? It is beyond the scope of this article (and of my knowledge) to answer this question, but there are irrefutably moments of dance performances that sear themselves – through the eyeballs as it were – into memory and never leave, so we can infer there is an accessible cerebral repository somewhere. If this ability to remember moments of a dance could be expanded into an ability to ‘read’ dance — it is interesting

in this connection that the French talk of choreographic writing (*écriture*) — would audiences be drawn more readily to dance?

I remember a performance of Sir Kenneth MacMillan's *Romeo and Juliet* in the mid-1970s, but it wasn't Nureyev or Fonteyn who caught my attention as much as a gesture of a corps dancer revealing one of the groups of Capulets or Montagues who had been fatally wounded in a sword fight. Pina Bausch's works are memorable for their play on memory: choreographic images that derive from that very place, perhaps, where they are stored.

Bausch came to mind when I saw a performance at Interplay, a street dance festival in Turin. It was a trio of women choreographed by Sara Marasso in a piece called *No strings attached #3*, and it was arresting principally because of the expressive power of Marasso herself, an intense, beautiful head supported on a spare but ruggedly articulate frame. She dances with a silent mimic quality and her long arms seem to be able to create meaning out of space. But what struck me most was her face for it did not register any emotional control over the rest of her body but responded to impulses in the same way as her torso, arms and legs.

A few days later I came across a passage in Laurence Louppe's *Poetics of Contemporary Dance* (in translation) where she discusses the fundamental change in expression that was part of the contemporary dance evolution: 'Firstly, (the contemporary dance body) had to allow the body to take the expressive role that facial expression had hitherto monopolized.' Then Louppe quotes from Hanya Holm: The face is of course the mirror of all that goes on, but it should not be more prominent than is intended and must not substitute for all that which isn't going on in the body.

This clarified what I had seen in Marasso and which she conveyed so convincingly; there is an integrity to the physical expression when this occurs. Too often the face resorts to displaying its emotional leadership and distracts by its overemphasis. The two women with Marasso (Teresa Noronha Feio and Maura Dessi) tended to fall into this mode, which gave Marasso's dancing by comparison a clarity of gesture in which each element of the body had its place. Interestingly a colleague found Marasso's performance lacking in emotion because the face was not emoting. For me, the entire body was expressive and in harmony. The emotion came through the body's gestures.