

Awakening the body's memory

Photos by Francisco Murguía, taken at a performance of the Rite of Spring.

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I haven't understood a bar of music in my life, but I have felt it.

Igor Stravinsky

When Gloria Contreras creates a new dance for the Taller Coreográfico, she doesn't simply call out the steps and positions that have names in the grammar of dance. She moves among her dancers, literally molding their forms into the shapes she has envisioned, ensuring that the movement flowing through these forms realizes its expressive potential.

Before she can touch an audience through dance, she must first share her vision with the dancers. As the process of mounting a new work reveals, this vision is transmitted not just optically but viscerally as well. Part of the challenge in creating a new work is to establish this sensory connection, which transcends traditional ideas of experience.

It is not enough for the choreographer to verbalize or demonstrate her intentions. Seemingly small alterations can dramatically alter the meaning of a simple phrase. The dancers must experience the precise movement before they can fully internalize the message they are to convey. It is only when they have physically recognized the choreographer's meaning that they are able to lend life to a work. As Contreras works with her performers,

it becomes clear that the choreographic process is a way of awakening the body's memory.

It is this corporeal memory that the dancers of the Taller Coreográfico evoke when they speak of the challenges of committing the company's active repertory to memory. The traditional intellectual challenges of memorizing the rhythms of more than eighty works are tremendous in themselves. Yet beyond this, the Taller's dancers speak of summoning an intelligence lying somewhere outside of what most Western philosophers would classify as the mind, as a key element enabling their performance.

This gift of corporeal intelligence is not limited to dancers. Nearly everyone recognizes the prickly sensation of being watched from behind. Even though we are unable to see who may be watching us, the body's memory triggers the tiny hairs along the back of our necks, signaling imminent danger. Over countless generations, we have learned how risky it is to ignore such messages.

The value of body memory extends well beyond self-preservation. It also transmits and decodes the unwritten and unpronounceable language of movement. The intense physical reactions that the best dance can provoke in an audience certainly suggest that both viewers and dancers may experience the import of movement through sensory means transcending sight and sound.

This undeniably complicates attempts to analyze dance through traditional methods of discourse. The interrelationships between dance and time increase the difficulty. Whether our response to a particular moment in a dance is mediated through sight, sound or corporeal memory, the pose that strikes a responsive chord within the viewer vanishes before it can be fully examined. Indeed, motion is an integral part of the message we perceive.

During my study of the Taller Coreográfico, I was fortunate enough to watch Gloria Contreras analyze a score that would ultimately become the basis for a ballet. I had already seen rehearsals of completed works, as well as the classes that lay the foundations of the Taller's performances. I had also enjoyed the sudden magical encounter of seeing the music transformed into a complete ballet on the stage. All these experiences deepened my comprehension of the choreographer's art.

But her *Consagración de la primavera* (Rite of Spring) was my first opportunity to see a work grow and develop from the analysis of the score to a full presentation. It was only after observing the entire creative process that I began to comprehend why Contreras' works are so tremendously powerful. No other classical composition comes as close to touching the memory of the body. It seems to stimulate the same nerve endings that inspired the first of all dances.

* Writer.

Since 1913 the *Rite of Spring* has posed choreographers a most formidable challenge. Stravinsky himself never saw a version of the ballet that he liked. None of the composer's contemporaries were able to create a dance capable of bearing the enormous weight of his epochal score. Only a handful of master choreographers have even dared to approach the work since its fateful premiere.

Stravinsky himself specified that the *Rite* should be "accompanied by a choreographic representation as purely abstract as possible." As one of the major exponents of the abstract neoclassical tradition, Contreras has

approached the music in a manner that clearly honors the composer's intent. Her dance does not simply tell a story; it creates an experience in its own right.

Watching the birth of this abstract dance provided insight into the birth of dance itself. The opening moments of Contreras' choreography are filled with literal representations of the blossoming of spring. She did not use the costumes or pantomime of traditional 19th-century "story ballet" to create these effects. Instead they came from mimesis—from explorations of essence, not reproductions of outward form.

In Contreras' ballet, time exists on two separate but inextricably

related scales. It is, at first, a story of sacrifice. From the awakening of the earth to the death that spring demands, the dance revives an entire ritual—one so ancient that it is frighteningly recognizable across continents and cultures. At the same time, the ritual itself occurs in a time beyond calendars. The elements of the dance simultaneously evoke past, present and future. The choreography compresses all ages of creation into little more than half an hour.

The entire dynamic of the dance is revealed in a few brief movements at the beginning of the ballet, as life begins to stir. The earth does not release the life it holds without a





UNAM Choreography Workshop

Founded in 1970, its purpose has been to impart dance and music culture to university students and the public at large, through both performances and classes. To date the Choreography Workshop has choreographed 224 works, ranging from music of the 14th century to the most up-to-date and has presented almost 1,500 performances to a total of more than one million people. For the workshop the element of music is as important as that of dance, since the music determines the kind of choreography created.

The Choreographic Workshop organizes educational symposia: "Contrology' and the Care of the Body" explains the technique, developed by Gloria Contreras, which permits the flexibility of all the muscles, the free play of joints and rhythmic breathing which assist in purifying the blood, freeing it from the toxins which poison it. This is a simple technique, carried out in a horizontal position, which can be applied by everyone from four-year-old children to 70-year-old adults.

"Dance and Music" is a concert/lecture which includes excerpts from the work of 16 different composers. In addition to a number of anecdotes on their lives, an analysis is made of the pieces' choreography, which is then danced by one of the workshop's prima ballerinas, providing a glimpse at the work as a whole. In approximately an hour and a half or two hours, the audience gets an idea of how the music's influence determines the dancer's movement, rhythm and forms of expression. Forty-five such presentations have been made so far in various of Mexico's institutions of higher education.

UNAM's Choreographic Workshop has also sought to involve different artists, awakening interest in dance through contests, exhibitions and books. It has organized three competitions relating to "Dance Photography," as well as competitions on the subjects of "Poetry About Dance," "Drawings of Dance" and "Painting and Sculpture About Dance." The material these produced was used in 64 exhibitions.

It also has a video library which includes recordings of all the workshop's choreographic productions. As far as publishing, the workshop has put out two teaching books which include hundreds of explanatory drawings: *Contrología*, *Ballet paso a paso* (Contrology, Ballet Step by Step—first level) and *Ballet paso a paso* (Ballet Step by Step—second level, vols. I and II). It has also put out two historical books, illustrated with works from the three photo contests.

In 1974 the workshop founded the Choreographic Workshop Seminar, a school for initiation in the care of the body and the technique of classical dance, for university students and the public in general. A team of twelve teachers currently gives a total of 2,811 hours of class a year to 600 students. Overall it has given classes to more than ten thousand people.

Alejandro Romero.

struggle. It forcefully pulls the beings it has so recently released back to the soil which gave them birth, demanding nourishment in return for the miracle it created.

The composer maintained that the pounding rhythms of the composition led him to the sacrificial rites of prehistoric Russia. Later in his career he wrote that "this idea came from the music, and not the music from the idea." The notations in the score outlining the various scenes came from the choreography of Vaslav

Nijinsky's failed ballet, not from Stravinsky himself.

That Gloria Contreras has looked into the heart of the score and found the story of her own homeland in no way contradicts the composer's musical argument. Her dance captures a Mexico where, despite the Conquest, Spring has remained unshakably eternal.

Her evocations of ancient Mexico clearly distinguish this version of the *Rite* from earlier settings of the ballet. Traditionally, the demanding role of

the Sacrifice has been danced by a woman. Martha Graham first garnered international attention when she appeared as the Sacrifice in Léonide Massine's setting of Stravinsky's music. Contreras, instead, has set this role for a powerful young warrior, someone the Mexica would accept as a worthy offering to Xipe Totec, the flayed God of Spring.

Like the warriors destined for sacrifice in Tenochtitlán, the chosen one enjoys access to a large group of concubines. Their purpose here is not



simply to divert the attentions of the elected youth from his future; their caresses are more ritual than erotic. They are fully aware that their own offerings must be completed with a far greater sacrifice. Even in their wildest, most abandoned couplings, they foresee the imminence of death.

But this reality seems, at first, beyond the chosen one. Even when he has been lifted above his people in an obvious reference to his forthcoming sacrifice, he seems almost oblivious to his destiny. It is not until he is presented with a personified omen of what is to come that he recognizes his fate. When the men of the tribe gather behind him and stretch one of their own between them, with his head hanging down toward the earth, the young warrior can no longer deny the reality of his future.

With this one act—a moment that must be regarded as a literal rediscovery

of some ancient rite—the chosen one is cut off from his community. He makes one last, desperate attempt to repeat an earlier performance with one of his concubines, but this is impossible for them both. His touch no longer represents life. She rejects him, as she must. At this point, even his concubines join in the ritual battle against him.

In the original versions of the *Rite* the chosen one danced herself to death. But for the final sacrifice Contreras returns to Mexica ceremonies honoring Xipe Totec. As the community watches, the chosen one fights his final battle with one leg tied to the *temalacatl*, the stone of sacrifice. His inevitable and utter defeat is far more anguished than the actual moment of death which follows. The heart sacrifice that ends the ballet only completes the killing which has already occurred.

The Mexican echoes in Contreras' *Consagración* clearly link it to her

earlier *Imágenes del quinto sol* (Images of the Fifth Sun). The struggle for life of *Sensemaya*, the cyclical nature of creation in *Isostasia*, and the difficult relationships among man, nature and God of *Réquiem para un poeta* (Requiem for a Poet) are all here as well. The *Consagración* touches on all of the basic philosophical questions she has explored over a lifetime of work. It is, in itself, an immense and painful offering that holds the promise of new creation.

Having seen Gloria Contreras' *Rite of Spring*, one can never hear Stravinsky's music in the same way again. In concert with the music, her movements explain elements of life that otherwise seem difficult to express. Through the paces of her dance, she arouses the body's memories. Her message is not one that we can simply understand; it is one we must feel. M

