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Improvisation - HIPR

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Seeking Truth in the Movement

Dancer, artist, educator, and conceptualist are just a few titles that can be given to Barbara Dilley. Her passion for seeking the mind-body connection has helped her develop a pedagogy that fuses the concepts of awareness, meditation, and improvisation. She has worked closely with Merce Cunningham and Yvonne Rainer, choreographed many works showcased in *The Sapsuckersummer*, *Wonder Dances*, and *To the Golden Gate Bridge*, as well as developed her own projects such as *Danspace* and *The Natural History of the American Dance*, her all-female company. Dilley has made huge strides for the artistic community such as choreographing the first creative work, “Melora,” the first piece ever to receive academic credit at her university, Mt. Holyoke College. She is also responsible for being the mastermind behind an interdisciplinary dance and history major there, as a result of her rigorous intellect and passion for dance theory. After teaching a summer session at Naropa, an institute that combines eastern Buddhist and contemplative methods with western scholarship, she was invited back to develop the now esteemed dance and movement theory programs there. Dilley’s contributions earned her the title of President at the institute for eight consecutive years until she decided to dedicate more time to professing. She is a large contributor to the development of what is known as “postmodern dance” through her involvement with the Judson Dance Theater experimental group, and The Grand Union improvisational group (“Barbara Dilley Papers”). As a result of these experiences, Buddhist and contemplative practices and ideology have greatly influenced

her to manifest the processes of thought, its connection to the body, and incorporate these methods into her artistic process and ways of thinking about the world.

The first place one can see Dilley's embodied philosophies is in her improvisational teaching processes. In her recent years, Dilley has had teaching be her main focus, as the classroom is a place that fosters great room for spontaneous improvisation activities. In the classroom, Dilley's goal is to have her students become awakened and aware of all the infinite possibilities that can occur every single moment while improvising. When asked for an overview of this improvisational process, Dilley states:

“It's a developmental process. One, from the self, being able to work with the inner body-mind as a source for expression and movement; to two, working with others toward ensemble awareness and forming relational compositions in space; and three, to understanding that we're creating an offering, a performance.” (Hedstrom)

In this description, one can find references to the Buddhist Four Noble Truths of suffering, a teaching that holds the main message that suffering exists in the world, and that there is a path to be taken to rectify it. The Second Noble Truth reveals that inherent suffering is caused by desire, ignorance, and the idea that “without the capacity for mental concentration and insight... one's mind is left undeveloped, unable to grasp the true nature of things” (“Basics of Buddhism”). In Dilley's improvisational process, the act of becoming aware of the inner body-mind connection, the connection with an ensemble, and the offering being created all reflect this Buddhist tenant of recognizing ignorance and correcting it with knowingness. These philosophies are also reflected in her ideas of “kinesthetic delight” which she articulates “is about the inner consciousness of movement... It has to do with not doing things because you think you should...without pointing to what you should or shouldn't find” (Hedstrom). This idea is related to “desire”, the other cause

of suffering. As humans, what we do and how we act is largely based on our desire to be fully accepted by others, which can never truly be satisfied. In turn, the idea of being connected to and contemplating one's inner desires, rather than doing movement because of how the outside world would perceive it, corrects this Buddhist cause of suffering.

Fondness for these Buddhist ideologies and its fusion with dance practices are reflected in Dilley's philosophies and teachings at the Naropa institute. Much of what she now incorporates into her own curriculum was initially influenced by the University's founder Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche. In an interview at Boulder Public Library, Dilley explains how she had not actually incorporated Buddhist meditation practice into her philosophy until her experiences at the first Naropa summer intensive, when she was introduced to Rinpoche's ideas. She described his view of Buddhism as "not doctrinal, but rather [an]... awakening to what is, the dynamics between things, learning, and being open... to be more fully [present] in the world" (Boulder Public Library). Upon being awoken to this way of approaching Buddhist ideology, Rinpoche appointed Dilley to be chancellor of the university, and she assumed the position with open arms, seeing it as a call for her to incorporate these ideas she was learning into the lives of students at Naropa.

One idea that she helped develop at Naropa was the idea of a contemplative education. Dilley explains that this approach to education focuses on "creating an educational journey where students are invited to think about the integration of what they are learning into their inner self... what resonates with their inner self... which includes the actual process of sitting, meditating, and taming the mind" (Boulder Public Library). One can see these contemplative techniques reflected in the exercises that are a part her dance curriculum. When referencing scores that involve only a single dancer, she insists "Solo practice is deep and necessary. Solos

bring the inner world into *this very moment* and connect us to our expressive longing... the less we do the more space there is to find that intuitive edge” (Dilley). These scores exemplify the contemplative nature of Dilley’s teaching methods regarding her references to the concepts of “intuition” and “inner world”, both of which are accessed through the Buddhist practice of meditation.

Dilley’s conviction that the integration of contemplative practices with physical embodiment can be beneficial to the improvisational processes can be seen in her discussions at the SILO retreat. One thing Dilley emphasized were the benefits that result from using a Tibetan, three-prajna contemplative technique. The practice, which she integrates into her everyday life, includes the process of hearing something, thinking about what was heard (contemplating), and then sitting down and meditating on it. Dilley believes that this process of interweaving different methods to approach a topic is the “instruction about how to awaken given potential” (“Barbara Dilley: On Contemplative Dance @ SILO”).

To unlock this potential in an improvisational respect, Dilley explains the following ideas that need to be taken into account. The first idea, “beginning again and again”, encourages the improviser to pause and then restart movement again to find new ways of doing something every time. The second idea, “using everything”, has improvisors make a list of everything they “know” whether it be movements or information from other discourses, to generate infinite inspirations for movement. The third idea, “continuous present”, encourages the improviser to embody the Buddha dharma idea of embracing the present moment to satisfy how the mind-body duo wants to move (“Barbara Dilley: On Contemplative Dance @ SILO”). Not only does Dilley believe contemplative methods have benefits to people as dancers, but to people as human beings as well. For example, in an interview at the SILO retreat, Dilley expressed that

“What the classroom has been for me is this research lab into the most simple and the most basic of skills for organizing and patterning expression through body language...

The classroom has been predominantly of performance lineage, but I also see it as a mode of knowing. These body-mind practices of learning to be in space and use eye practices, learning to see clearly, look directly, have peripheral vision, be in relationship with others in a nonverbal process of making stuff... generates a kind of grounded sanity for just being comfortable with being a human being.” (“Barbara Dilley: On Contemplative Dance @ SILO”)

Here one can see Dilley’s belief that contemplative practice is a path to enlighten the world as a whole and help people find peace with their own being, technical dance concepts aside.

In conclusion, Dilley’s exploration of dance practice outside the confinements of technique as seen in her work with The Grand Union, the Judson Dance Theatre, Naropa University, and many others, have given contemplative, Buddhist practices credibility, and helped label the art form as something worth researching from an embodied, academic perspective. Through her improvisational process, she intends to help people achieve a greater awareness of the world in which they live and seize the opportunities that are in front of them. Her work at Naropa University continues to influence generations of students moving through higher education to apply contemplative practice to their dancing to fuse the knowledge they take in with their own personal feelings and desires. Dilley’s influence not only reaches dancers, but it extends even further. Although contemplative methods of approaching embodiment have benefited Dilley as a member of the dance community, they have served the greater purpose of significantly bolstering her realization of what it means to be a present human being that is dancing through life, just as all of us humans are.

Works Cited

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