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The Body Eclectic: Evolving Practices in Dance Training (review)

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clues. But she also practices choreographic research—the trying out of movement ideas to see how they fit the music, experimenting with the possible pathways and interactions to which these ideas could have been subjected. And like the most interesting scholars, Hodson cycles these discoveries into the dance and out again, to generate new questions and new avenues for research.

Hodson is a person who thinks about dance. It’s exhilarating to read someone who gets past the received opinion and rehearsed mythology that informs and imprisons many other historians. It doesn’t matter if you agree with her conclusions: she makes you look at the dance again. In her introductory chapters she traces the chronology of Jeux, looking at the interplay among the major characters: Debussy, Diaghilev, Nijinsky and his sister Bronislava, the dancers Karsavina and Schollar. She downplays gossip but tries to sort out the personal claims and biases that inform the various sources: the conservative resistance of Grigoriev and Fokine, who perceived Nijinsky as a threat and an interloper; the conflicted composer, who thought Nijinsky choreographed his music too literally; the Nijinsky loyalists Bronislava Nijinska and Richard Buckle.

Evaluating alliances and rivalries, determining whether a witness was seeing with loving eyes or political myopia, weighing careless remarks against well-founded observations—all this is basic to good historical research, but it’s often skipped over as scholars pursue a predetermined conclusion or argument. One of the reasons Millicent Hodson’s career has been so productive is her embrace of the historical project in all its ramifications: tracking down the story, assessing the evidence, making her own storyline in words and drawings as well as movement, and sharing her insights in lectures, workshops, and rehearsals. Whether doing research or crafting the project to life with dancers, Hodson is making astute interpretations and putting her own stamp on the ballet. Reading Nijinsky’s Bloomsbury Ballet, it almost seems that conceptualizing and internalizing her subject is as satisfying to her as restoring, choreographing, and directing the ballets on live dancers. She doesn’t seem to consider any of her reconstructions definitive, and she bills them as “after” the original choreographers. Perhaps there will be Nijinsky reincarnations after hers. I don’t think she’d be surprised.

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THE BODY ECLECTIC: EVOLVING PRACTICES IN DANCE TRAINING
by Melanie Bales and Rebecca Nettl-Fiol.
2008. Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press. 264 pp., notes, works cited, and index. $70.00 cloth; $30.00 paper.

In The Body Eclectic: Evolving Practices in Dance Training, editors Melanie Bales and Rebecca Nettl-Fiol focus directly on “the practices . . . that thread through the jumbled collection of experiences that comprise late twentieth- and very early twenty-first century dance training” (ix). They remind us at once of the centrality of training to the art of dance and to its cultural and epistemic potency. Bales and Nettl-Fiol begin with the premise that training practices are not only skill builders—they are sites for the invention, discovery, and development of dance (viii). As such, they are generative sites of art and knowledge production. Of greatest significance, Bales and Nettl-Fiol develop a framework for making sense of the current context of eclectic, self-styled dance training. The framework consists of two contrasting concepts: bricolage and deconstruction. These two concepts carry broad cultural currency
and are commonly invoked in the arts, in academe, and in politics as strategies for addressing these increasingly mediated, layered, and globally minded times. Bales and Nettl-Fiol elaborate the motif, first applied to dance by Elizabeth Dempster (1995), by detailing specific ways that bricolage and deconstruction are practiced in the training of the self-styled dancer. In doing so the authors situate training practices in relation to cultural and personal contexts. Moreover, they treat the cultivation of one’s training practices as an art in which dancers can and do assert political and creative agency. Part ethnography, and part a call for conscious practice, this book is an invaluable resource for our field.

The Body Eclectic enters a trajectory of fairly recent writing that recognizes dance training as politicized terrain and includes authors Donald Blumenfeld-Jones, Martha Eddy, Jill Green, Silvie Fortin, Susan Foster, Sherry Shapiro, and Susan Stinson. Bales and Nettl-Fiol accomplish two notable feats in their investigation. The first is their weaving together of historical, cultural, economic, philosophic, and personal contexts—theoretical musings are grounded in the rich and accessible territory of personal experiences. Bales and Nettl-Fiol call their work ethnographic, and its strength lies in the fact that they do not speak for their “subjects.” Through ample incorporation of interview transcripts, the authors speak with the dancers they describe. There is a solid tradition in the field of dance scholarship of interviews and oral histories. Beginning with Selma Jean Cohen’s The Modern Dance: Seven Statements of Belief (1965), dance scholars have asked our artists to speak from personal experience, to theorize their own conditions, in their own words. The Body Eclectic follows in this tradition by including substantial interviews with a variety of dancers whose stories fall in and out of line with the central themes of the book. The stories inform, specify, and contrast the layered analysis presented by the authors, thereby furthering the themes of bricolage and deconstruction.

The second notable and fertile aspect of this work is that the authors allow space for each reader, and each dancer, to discover and develop personal politics in relation to their own training practices. They do so by highlighting the role of intention in the engagement of movement practice. Bales and Nettl-Fiol’s framework fosters agency, even in economically difficult times. It is a framework for making conceptual sense of motley training regimen (combining, for instance, ballet with yoga and contact improvisation) as a potent means of cultivating one’s artistry as a contemporary dancer. We are not free from the values embedded in the movement we practice; yet we can make informed and generative choices as we choose our practices. This is in direct contrast to the notion, set forth in Susan Foster’s valuable essay “Dancing Bodies” (1997) of the eclectically training dancer as a “hired body” with homogenized ability and aesthetic. The hired body is shaped by economic forces and lacks depth and specific aesthetic vision. Bales and Nettl-Fiol offer a practical strategy for dancers to recoup their agency by actively and thoughtfully crafting unique systems of training.

The book is organized into three parts. The first two, respectively entitled “Bricolage” and “Deconstruction” contain essays exemplifying those concepts, and the third, “Training Stories,” offers grounded, specific accounts of dancers training histories in the form of uninterrupted interviews. Throughout the book, the authors focus on three recurrent themes: the use of alternative movement practices as training; ballet as an adjunct technique for modern dance; and the eclectic, self-styled approach to dance training (ix). These three themes are considered in various relation to layering (bricolage) and stripping down
(deconstruction). Most practices, for instance ballet, find themselves sometimes in one, and sometimes in the other.

Part 1, “Bricolage,” is introduced by Melanie Bales. In her essay, “A Dancing Dialectic,” Bales delineates the “current state” as post-Judson. Here Bales brings clarity to what may seem to be a haphazard approach to training, describing a dialectic process of development through thesis/antithesis/synthesis. In a second essay, “Training as the Medium Through Which,” Bales offers a historical perspective on eclecticism extending back to early modern dance and sketches out the distinguishing characteristics of post-Judson training, one of which is the view of technique as a mode of critique. Part 1 also contains three contributions by participants from different perspectives: two are dancers, Veronica Dittman and Joshua Monten, and the third, Natalie Gilbert, is a professional dance accompanist who offers an interesting and unique perspective on the field. The last essay in this section is Bales’s own consideration of the role of ballet for the post-Judson dancer. It is in these chapters that difficult issues are interrogated and grounded in the various perspectives. For instance, Monten fleshes out the subtle differences between multilayered eclecticism, homogeneity, and appropriation in dancing, addressing both physical virtuosity and cultural politics in his analysis.

Part 2 of The Body Eclectic is introduced by Nettl-Fiol and includes contributions from a variety of seminal figures in dance training. In an interview with Nettl-Fiol, Martha Meyers offers a historicized perspective on the inclusion of somatic practices in dance training, beginning in 1969 when as dean of the American Dance Festival (ADF) she first introduced somatic practices as part of the ADF curriculum. The influence of somatic practices has expanded, and in her essay entitled “First It Was Dancing,” Nettl-Fiol collages the perspectives of six dancers describing the ways in which they incorporate the Alexander technique into their training, choreography, and teaching. Wendell Beavers revisits his important 1993 essay on dance training, entitled “States of the Body,” and reconsiders its relevance to the current state of the art. Glenna Batson brings a scientific perspective to the issues at hand, describing the shift away from static mechanical analysis toward Dynamic Systems Theory in the sciences and its relationship to dance improvisation, somatics, and training. In the final essay in Part 2, “Falling, Releasing, and Post-Judson Dance,” Bales addresses the dangerous temptation to read specific “meaning” in movement practices. Drawing on George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s (1980) research on “orientational metaphors,” Bales gives potential explanations for some of the shifts that occurred in the post-Judson period in movement posture and relation to gravity. By grounding her discussion in specific examples that support and challenge her thesis, Bales avoids essentializing the movement itself, deftly showing “how any experiential concept can be a way into knowledge of multiple sorts” (162).

Part 3 consists of a series of sixteen uninterrupted interviews of dance artists and choreographers, including luminaries such as David Dorfman, Ralph Lemon, Bebe Miller, Terry O’Connor. The interviews are fairly open and avoid imposing any single agenda. In Part 3 the major themes of the book are enlivened and specified. The triangulation of Bales and Nettl-Fiol’s conceptual analysis with sixteen training stories not only deepens the methodological rigor of their analysis, it also broadens its appeal to a broad audience.

It seems to me that the intended audience for The Body Eclectic includes dance teachers, particularly those in academic settings, choreographers, and dancers participating or hoping to enter the field of dance as performers. It
would, however, be a missed opportunity to overlook other potential audiences who might benefit from this book, including college and university administrators needing to evaluate the activities of their faculty and assess the quality, rigor, and relevance of their dance program, and any dance students interested in the context behind their dance classes.

In teaching dance technique in my college setting, I try to help my students make sense of the role of training in their liberal arts education. The struggle is as much mine as theirs, as I encounter the many associations and epistemological implications of the words “technique” and “training.” Dance training—and technique class—is in many ways the least examined and the least understood aspect of our art from the perspective of liberal arts education. In the few months since first encountering this book, I have found occasion to assign it in courses ranging from Dance Composition to Introduction to Dance, and to share it with administrators and faculty in fields outside my own who are eager to understand the state of contemporary dance. It is a valuable addition to the academic discourse around dance. It is also a rich resource for personal investigation that not only encourages but also offers a generative framework for developing one's personal agency and artistry during challenging times.

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Works Cited


THE STRUGGLE WITH THE ANGEL: A POETICS OF LLOYD NEWSON’S STRANGE FISH
by Janet Adshead-Lansdale. 2007. Alton, Hampshire, UK: Dance Books, Ltd. 258 pp., bibliography, and index. $44.95 paper.

In The Struggle with the Angel Janet Adshead-Lansdale has attempted a book-length analysis of a single work of physical theater: DV8 choreographer Lloyd Newson’s 1992 Strange Fish, which was first performed onstage and later reworked for video. Adshead-Lansdale’s project, as she describes it, is as much about presenting a method of dance analysis as it is about analyzing Strange Fish (29). The book can thus be neatly split in two, with the first three chapters focused on the articulation of a methodological approach with very spare introductions to Strange Fish, and the second three chapters engaged in the sort of intertextual analysis Adshead-Lansdale proposes for dance research.

The final chapter, “An Elegy,” functions both as conclusion and as the absent introduction, wherein the author makes her theoretical and political agendas explicit. She argues, “The body, dance, and music occupy a peculiar place in many critical writings . . . as rich analogical or metaphorical material, not as subjects of study” (235). In analyzing Strange Fish and what she calls the “intertextual traces” that surround the work, Adshead-Lansdale argues that dance merits “serious” consideration. She also reveals her position that “The ‘gay male aesthetic’ . . . has for some years dominated the British dance landscape” (242), and that the shift toward