



PROJECT MUSE®

Moving Together: Theorizing and Making Contemporary Dance by
Rudi Laermans (review)

Amanda Hamp

TDR: The Drama Review, Volume 61, Number 3, Fall 2017 (T235), pp. 181-183
(Review)

Published by The MIT Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/669335>

Although the book's 11 chapters proceed more or less chronologically, the argument has a topical logic, pausing for a history of *Antigone's* reception in philosophy, and to comment on the relation between revenge and tragedy, on neoclassicism, on Racine and Jacques Lacan, and on various engagements with the possibility of a postdramatic tragedy. The writing is determined, dense, occasionally abrupt. Peter Szondi is a presiding figure, alongside Bertolt Brecht; Terry Eagleton and Raymond Williams are briskly dismissed. But perhaps the most arresting element of this book is that, in ways reminiscent of a book Lehmann approves, Samuel Weber's *Theatricality as Medium* (2004), it conceives theatrical experience largely in relation to dramatic writing. Lehmann's engagement with writing is often luminous: the sense that *Oedipus the King* produces a spectatorial recognition (*agnorisis*) of nonunderstanding, or that neoclassical acting in the status-driven theatre of 17th-century Paris focused on an "intersubjective" interplay of gazes rendered tragic through the designs of Racine's writing. But while Lehmann comments suggestively on the general importance of dance in understanding Greek performance, perhaps less persuasively on the movement from masked to unmasked acting, and shrewdly on the demands of modern symbolism in the theatre, there is only passing discussion of the material theatre and practical activities framing the tragic experience: architecture, acting practices, the disposition of audiences, and so on. It may well be that "the connection between the tragic and the theatre always takes shape in a different way" (411), but Lehmann's ferocious attention to the rhetoric of tragedy might particularize and materialize that experience, recalling for instance the structuring interplay of nascent capitalism and nationalism in the early modern experience of *Hamlet* or *Othello* sustaining the "sterile promontory" of London's wooden "O"; or the "aristocratic" intimacy choreographed by the drawing room performances imagined by W.B. Yeats (who, notably, saw his innovations in movement, gesture, and vocal technique precisely as means to foreground the poetic text); even the production decisions made around Kane's *4:48 Psychosis* (2000), which have typically domesticated the resistant mise-en-page of Kane's drama. *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre* already delivers much more than it promises, but the impulse to ask for more arises from the informing structure of Lehmann's argument. For although there was a predramatic tragedy, and now a postdramatic tragedy, this book is preoccupied by tragic experience that can be known by its texts, the tragedy of that necessary spectre of Lehmann's perspective on performance, the "dramatic theatre."

—W.B. Worthen

Reference

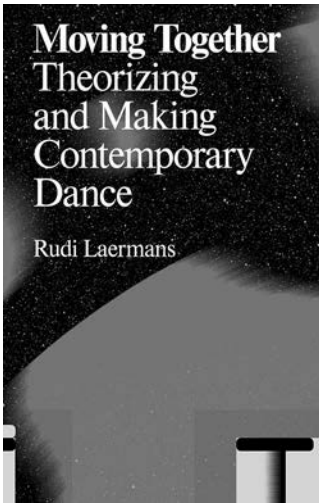
Lehmann, Hans-Thies. 2006. *Postdramatic Theatre*. Translated by Karen Jürs-Munby. London: Routledge.

W.B. Worthen is the Alice Brady Pels Professor in the Arts at Barnard College, where he chairs the Department of Theatre. He is codirector of the PhD Program in Theatre at Columbia University, where he is also Professor of English and Comparative Literature, and Professor of Theatre in the School of the Arts. His most recent books are Drama: Between Poetry and Performance (Blackwell, 2010) and Shakespeare Performance Studies (Cambridge, 2014). He is currently writing a book on theatre as technology. wworthen@barnard.edu

TDR: The Drama Review 61:3 (T235) Fall 2017. ©2017
New York University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Moving Together: Theorizing and Making Contemporary Dance. By Rudi Laermans. Amsterdam: Valiz, 2015; 429 pp.; \$28.95 paper.

In *Moving Together: Theorizing and Making Contemporary Dance*, Rudi Laermans offers a definition of contemporary dance, and analyzes how it's made. The book gives a discerning account of "dance beyond ballet" made in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, between 1982



and 2006. Laermans highlights circumstances that fostered the “Flemish wave,” and that currently sustain Brussels as a principal center of dance in Europe and the international circuit. These circumstances include substantial governmental funding; theatres such as Kaaitheater in Brussels and Vooruit in Ghent; the biennial Klapstuk (now operating as STUK), which began presenting both Flemish and international artists in 1983; and Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker’s establishment of P.A.R.T.S. (Performing Arts Research and Training Studios) in 1995, which continues to populate the Flemish scene with graduates who become esteemed dancers and choreographers.

Moving Together has three main subjects of study: dances made between 1982 and 2006; a collaborative dance-making process led by De Keersmaeker with her company, Rosas, in 1995; and conversations and interviews conducted between 2008 and 2011 with dance artists involved in the transnational Brussels dance community. Laermans is a sociologist whose perspectives on dances, the field of dance, and the activities of

dance-making are informed by German social theorist Niklas Luhmann and his systems theory, which holds that social systems, such as the world of contemporary dance, are systems of communication. This influence is evident throughout Laermans’s analysis and in statements such as: “Viewed through a sociological lens, one never is a tremendous choreographer but one endlessly *becomes* one through repeatedly being named as such by a plethora of individual actors” (77). Laermans also engages theories from Giorgio Agamben, Roland Barthes, Howard Becker, Walter Benjamin, Judith Butler, and Michel de Certeau. He includes voices from dance studies, such as Sally Banes, Ramsay Burt, Susan Foster, and chiefly André Lepecki. Additionally, he frequently references modern and postmodern dance artists, especially the Judson Dance Theatre, and he occasionally discusses the history of contemporary dance in relation to that of the visual arts. At over 400 pages, the book allows Laermans to consider contemporary dance, particular dances, and the dance-making process through multiple lenses.

The book is divided into two parts. In part 1, Laermans describes, historicizes, and theorizes contemporary dance and specific works presented in Flanders, and, in part 2, he analyzes a contemporary choreographic process, focusing on a “semi-directive mode of participative collaboration” (294). Each part contains sections that are divided into a “First Movement” and “Second Movement.” Inserted at various points throughout this structure are intermezzi, where Laermans develops lines of thinking about various topics, such as “The Temporalities of Dance,” “Reconsidering Conceptual Art,” and “Defining ‘The Choreographic,’” a term he conceives (without reference to Jenn Joy’s project [2014]) as “the space in which dance is written” (195). Beginning in the first section’s First Movement, Laermans frames much of his thinking in terms of opposites, paradoxes, and “unity of differences,” such as when he posits, “the medium of dance is a merely virtual potential consisting of all possible movements and non-movements” (53). Also in this first section, Laermans discusses Jérôme Bel’s *Le Denier Spectacle* (1998) in order to introduce a main assertion of the book: what distinguishes contemporary dance from modern dance, “pure dance,” or theatre dance is its reflexivity. Contemporary dance is a critical practice that meditates on and questions dance’s material elements and discourses (46–50, 208–12).

Throughout part 1, Laermans offers a “thick description” of and theorizes pieces by reflexive dance makers, including Bel, De Keersmaeker, Vincent Dunoyer, Jan Fabre, Etienne Guilloteau, and Meg Stuart, with full sections devoted to work by De Keersmaeker and Stuart. Laermans argues that De Keersmaeker and the Rosas company complicate minimalist and “pure” dance by permitting performers’ individuality and agency in their recitation of repetitive phrases, and

through gestures that lay bare cultural conditions of spectatorship. Regarding Stuart's work, Laermans argues the overall result is multiple representations of the body as both subject to and capable of intervening on structuring forces. For Laermans, "This re-framing of the legitimate dancing body evidently re-articulates the practice of choreography" (181). In addition to the choreographic analysis of dances that question the nature of dance, Laermans develops ideas on "potentiality and impotentiality," the "danceable," modes of viewing dance, and the trajectory from postmodernist to contemporary dance.

Seemingly a distinct project from part 1, though no less theoretical, part 2 analyzes the making of contemporary dances, and puts forth a theory of "the collaboratory." Laermans identifies collaboration as a defining feature of contemporary dance, and he (along with the dancers he interviews) critiques the "regime of singularity," rooted in Romantic notions of the genius-artist and carried through modernism. Yet he concentrates on a "semi-directive" model of collaboration, which can have many different hierarchical arrangements but "does not relinquish the principal power of difference between a deciding subject and those subjected to its decisions" (354). Near the end of the book, Laermans broadens his focus to include a brief but fruitful discussion of "non-directive" or "flat" collaboration, which is characterized by peer-to-peer cooperation, and which "quasi-automatically invites to speak in terms of 'we'" (387). His mention of two artists' works—Xavier Le Roy's *E.X.T.E.N.T.I.O.N.S.* (1999–2002), followed by *Project* (2003), and deufert&plichke's *Tentative Asembly (the tent piece)* (2012)—invites further research and ethnographic study of collaborative dance-making networks and processes.

Laermans's sociological perspective on contemporary dance and dance-making offers a systems-based view of this particular world and its practices. What does collaboration look like after Laermans's project—after 2006, the end point of his deeper analysis, and 2015, when the book was published? Noyale Colin and Stefanie Sachsenmaier's collection, *Collaboration in Performance Practice: Premises, Workings and Failures* (2016) puts forward examples and ideas. Expanding on Laermans, if "the medium of dance is a merely virtual potential consisting of all possible movements and non-movements" (53), can collaboration be thought of as a virtual potential consisting of all possible relations and non-relations, ways of relating and co-making? And in what ways will contemporary dance artists become conceptual and reflexive in their collaborations? Laermans presents collaboration as a rich territory for dancers and scholars to explore further, perhaps moving together.

—Amanda Hamp

Reference

Colin, Noyale, and Stefanie Sachsenmaier, eds. 2016. *Collaboration in Performance Practice: Premises, Workings and Failures*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Joy, Jenn. 2014. *The Choreographic*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Amanda Hamp is Assistant Professor of Dance at the University of New Mexico. Her articles have been published in Choreographic Practices, Theatre Topics, and TDR. She is a cofounding member of AGA Collaborative, a trio of dance artist-scholars who collaborate across geographic distance and in residencies together on performance and research projects. www.agacollaborative.org; ahamp@unm.edu

TDR: The Drama Review 61:3 (T235) Fall 2017. ©2017
New York University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology