



MAIRA SANTOS

## THE CHOREOGRAPHIC BECOMING IN CLASSROOM CONTEXTS: SERENDIPITY IN THE INSTANT COMPOSITION OF JULYEN HAMILTON

*This article aims at discussing the notion of ‘instant composition’ according to the conception of the British choreographer Julyen Hamilton, through his pedagogical work, which is dedicated to the performance, that is, to the scene work. His body practices are therefore based on improvisational work from the beginning, aiming at the instant composition as choreography. Thus, one of the questions that arises is how the choreographer agencies the choreographic processes and becomings in workshop and class contexts, considering that his training work differs little from the one he has done with his Allen’s Lien Company and his solos. For that purpose, an artistic practice of ethnography (Fortin, 2009) has been held in which the privileged field was the studio itself and workshops held in Berlin’s circuits of contemporary dance between January and June 2015.*

### Presentation and Introduction

Julyen Hamilton is a teacher, dancer, choreographer, poet and musician. He began his studies in theatre from a very young age, when he was nine years old. Over forty years he has been performing dance pieces as director and performer, often accumulating both functions. Since 2009 he directs his own company, the Allen’s Line, whose work’s basis is orchestrated by dance, space, voice and text. Hamilton is part of the dance history, of the body performance as an independent artistic practice, of the body as an instrument of communicability, poetry, humour and drama. Not coincidentally Hamilton considers his pedagogical work as something arising directly from his stage work, that is, his artistic work. His curriculum reveals an intense and profound experience with art, thus indicating that his greatest school was, and still is, the stage.

Julyen Hamilton’s pedagogical work aims at the performance. The potency of his work is, among other points, in the creation of small pieces that are assembled at the end of a working day, either a workshop or his own open class. These small pieces, formed by groups of three to seven people, range from seconds to minutes (maximum five minutes, usually). Time becomes relative because everything will depend on the nature of the “piece” itself. For Julyen Hamilton, knowing about the end of a piece is sometimes related to “speaking voices”, some other times it is possible to feel through objects used in the scene. About his Company, I asked him how he knows when his pieces are ready to go on stage, since the work is always done with instant compositions. Then Hamilton (2015) replies:



“I know it’s ready when I feel that everyone understood the anima of the piece, the spirit of the piece, something that stands out as spiritual. They should not know everything about the piece because they are in constant learning about any piece we do. So, we never know about anything. Like any work of art, you never know everything.”

The choreographer considers, however, that it will always be a great risk to determine the end, because “saying no to the material that is being created” (Hamilton 2015) seems to be a more difficult task than the creation itself. In his conception, it is each piece that determines its own end, that is, its end would be connected to something that is not related only to our own aesthetics and idiosyncrasies. This thought seems to meet a discussion held at the Panorama Festival (2013) in which the speaker, André Lepecki, when debating about the author’s authority, function or sovereignty, considered that the work of art had its own sovereignty, being the one that should decide on its fate and not the author, because the work would have the “will to work”. In the same way Hamilton tells us that making art involves “serving the work”. In this process of creating instantly, improvisation is “to open a moment” for him, to serve to something that is not just about ourselves:

Of course we have to serve ourselves. Of course this is part of the responsibility in life. If you are improvising with more people, a collective, it is not just me or you. (...) There is a high vibrational level, to serve something that is yet to come. It is an invitation to serve that movement at that moment (Hamilton 2015).

What seems relevant to me and also potent in this discussion refers again to the seminar held at the Panorama Festival (2013) with Xavier Le Roy’s affirmation, resumed by Lepecki about serving the piece as a way of “coming out of ourselves”. A way of scaping from the “self-praising”, letting the “will of the thing” remain, that the “impersonal” can divert the intention of the work (Lepecki 2013). Thus, it does not seem by chance that Hamilton tells us that we can feel the piece through the object or when we “invite an object for the play” we bring the idea of the choreography.

Hamilton, in the context of the classes, when observing or even participating in the compositions, is the one who will determine the end of the play, clearly saying “the end”. An established rule is that when the end is announced, everyone on the scene should pause exactly where they are. This pause ends only after a second sign with the words - “end of the end” - a process that lasts a few seconds. Between the first end and the second end (end of the end) a space-time seems to be established and the stop that is created is organized in a metastable equilibrium (Manning 2009: 43), demanding micromoviments that pass through the articulations of the body so that nothing is withheld or hardened. The pause would offer to the public, and even to those who are on the scene, this present over a past or a presence in the absence, allowing us to remember what was left behind and absorb its traces, its ephemerality or its disappearance. Hamilton explains that the space until the “end of the end” is the time when we observe the “skin of the piece”. Something that would cover the whole piece, in his words, “like oil on wood”.

The instant composition conducted by Hamilton tries to accomplish the improvement of the



interpreter through a kind of work that searches for qualities of movement to reach scenic levels, or the scenic body which, in the words of Eleonora Fabião (2010: 321) would be the one that “experience potentialized space and time” and also “potentializes time and space”. It therefore seeks the presence or the “present of the present” (Fabião 2010), for the exercises conducted by Hamilton, resulting from the instant composition in instant composition itself, seem to contemplate “the ability to know and live this doubled present, [determined by] the presence of the actor”. Or, in other words:

Getting lost on the outskirts of the instant – in the anxiety of the future of the present or in the dispersion of the past from the present - makes the agent absent from his presence. The quality of the actor’s presence is associated with his/her ability to embody the present of the present, time of the attention. The past will be evoked or the future envisioned as forms of the present. (Cfr Fabião 2010: 322, our translation).

In any case, there seems to be a link between time, presence and quality of movement whose goal is the creation. In Hamilton’s work creation seeks the now rather than the future. For Fabião, the past and future forms are factors that can happen jeopardizing the actor’s quality of presence. One way of maintaining the quality of presence would be conjugating both as forms of the present.

In this work we consider the place of practice as an agency for thought and creation. Jose Gil speaks of agencies, in accordance with Deleuze & Guattari. Thus, we understand that the agencies create “new connections among materials, new nexus, other passageways to energy [...]”, demanding always new agencies (Gil 2005: 57). So, the agency, always linked to desire, would not be only the desire of agencing, but transformation, “production” and “construction” in itself. The danced gesture being, for Gil, in fact, a particular agency of the body, constituted as a gesture “that agencies the body to an object or to other bodies” (Gil 2005: 58):

What agencies the dance gestures? We can say: they agence gestures with other gestures; or a current body with the virtual bodies that update them; or even movement with other movements. In all cases, the danced gestuality experience the movement (its circuits, its quality, its strength) in order to obtain the best conditions for it to perform a choreography. In this sense, dancing is experiencing, working the possible agencies of the body. Now, this work consists mainly on agencing. Dancing is, therefore, agencing the agencies of the body (Gil, our translation, 2005: 58).

## Instant Compositions

### 1. *Reenactment, aftermath and the material that becomes archive*

In Hamilton’s work, at the end of each instant composition there is always the ritual of the applause. For him the applause still allows something to be celebrated in the way it’s been created,



whatever being the result. After a few seconds, the small pieces created follow an analysis ritual that often involves the reenactment of some moments. That is, after the end of the piece, if there is something to be commented, Hamilton would try to reconstruct those moments, through a reenactment with the interpreters who lived such situations. We here approach one of the phases of theatrical performance as proposed by Schechner (1988 and 2013) : the aftermath, the moment after a performance, that is, its consequences and assessments of what has been done. It could be perceived that the reenactment eventually generates repetitions resulting different materials, being transformed into something much more powerful.

Considering an instant composition session, a way to maintain the quality of presence conjugating it as a form of present would be the repetition of the same event that had occurred in that same presentation, resulted from a meeting among interpreters, or of a solo in that particular space, which had happened in a past, be it in the beginning of the play or just seconds ago. Sometimes precious movements happen in a certain time and space. We will always be able to trigger them as memory devices, so that if we pass where the movement occurred by any chance, it is always possible to follow its trace, to have the memory of what happened, to repeat the same in a different way.

Thus, the poetics of combining past and future with the present, as Fabião proposes, for example, would be possible when, through this state of attention, we could turn a material into an “archive”. The material that “becomes archive” refers to the possibility of returning to a certain situation, especially when it comes to a remarkable situation, clear or even more imagetic. In this sense, we can “archive” a material in the body to be able to use it in the future, as if we could go back in time or retrace a past trajectory. Therefore, it is as if one could feel and see the impression of this body and mind being touched as a re-enactment of a past moment. The notion of archive relates here with the stories that we carry in our bodies, as well as with the movement sequences composed at that time and space of the instant composition. On the other hand, the memory, when archived, may return as interpretation and not necessarily as the same thing because, considering the becoming, we are not necessarily the same person anymore.

Another way of relating with the material that is being created and eventually turning it into an archive would be always keeping the listening and the attention to where the other performers and the objects with whom we work are. Similarly, trying to observe the structure and the material that is being created as a reminiscence of what happens. There are, however, many ways of letting yourself be touched and many ways of dealing with the material that is being created. You can let yourself be immersed in the material and “forget” the interpreters and objects. However, the quotation marks indicate that the connection is felt and maintained, because it doesn't mean that anyone who is dancing need to look at his/her partner all the time, for example. The result of all that is that the interpreters become more open to “dialogue”, to create more relationships, therefore, for composition.

## 2. *The nature of symbols, not knowing and not having conclusions*



Walk in the city and read what happens. And then stand up in a corner. Do you know what it's like to stay in this place? If you don't know, look for old stories. Or stand in a corner for one hour. Do not take my words. Go there and stand in front of a door as she did in the improvisation. Sweat for it. Stand up in front of a door with an empty bowl. (Hamilton 2015)

Hamilton's description above was the result of one of the instant compositions made with an object, a bowl. In this example, aspects of dramaturgy, art, symbology, relationship between the body and the object can be highlighted, which are fundamental to reflect about creation. Thus, one of the interpreters was paused between the bowl and the threshold of one of the RADIALSYSTEM V studio doors. The choreographer alerts us to the image and the symbology of the object itself: "What happens when you put a bowl on the floor? What is the image of a bowl on the floor?" (Hamilton 2015). These questions intended to make us perceive how the dramaturgy and the choreography could be woven in connection with the image established, considering that a bowl on the table would be different from a bowl on the floor or an empty bowl in the sill of a door. It is Jose Gil (2005: 16) who talks about "the visible hollow in the Sung ceramics" and about another:

primordial void, invisible void that is out of the given forms level - and that fascinates because it doesn't represent anything, nor anything represents it, manifesting itself only in the radiant energy that it breaks out. The Great Emptiness inhabits the Sung bowl no longer as a hollow space limited by the ceramic, but supporting it in full, passing through it, wrapping and presenting it. It engenders the energy and binds itself to the infinite (our translation).

For Gil the energy flows are, above all, a "matter of scale in perception: the repose (or the first movement) is offered in a macroperception, while the microperception doesn't find anything but movement" (Gil 2005: 15). What reflects the fundamentals of art for him, i.e., the silence and the emptiness of the great masters of Chinese painting: "The emptiness, in Chinese painters of Taoist background, is what expresses the form".

Hamilton also suggests the gaze at the world, i.e., how the observation of things around us can become materials of composition:

We must learn to see, to grope, not exactly to analyze but look beyond to see how things live together. Look! There is a woman standing in a doorway. Go to this woman, go to this place. Find out what is being said, together with its poetic, theoretical and symbolic sides. In order to do this, go to town and watch [...]. But try not to draw conclusions. Look exactly where and how these things live together. And then dance with this technique. It can be very rich. (Hamilton 2015)

A recurring point in Julyen Hamilton's work is the exclusion of conclusions, because we don't anticipate the end, which in some way is related to the "not knowing" that André Lepecki talks about, and also the choreographer João Fiadeiro in partnership with the anthropologist Fernanda Eugenio. Lepecki talks about how to make the "not knowing" a method, for the "not knowing" would make us produce more, or work "for what is about to come". When discussing the



figure and the role of the playwright, Lepecki (2010: 193) consolidates this idea: “(...) by taking “not knowing” not as condition to be overcome, surpassed, repressed, or feel anxious about – but as rigorous method to be pursued to its ultimate consequences (...)”. About the role of dramaturgy, for example, Lepecki suggests that it would not be ruled by the desire to know, but by the force of not knowing, having the interpreters, then, at his service, for the work itself wishes to get somewhere. In other words, we must wish to work for the piece that is to come:

[...] I am localizing as main operative force in dramaturgy the hard work of desire – desire understood as agency as desire to assemble, to work together, to work together with the work – and thus serve the immanent imperative of a work that is coming not only because we desire it, but because it (the work) wants to arrive. And, in this dynamics, I am proposing (perhaps polemically) that what drives dramaturgy is not the desire to know – but the force of not knowing. (Lepecki, 2010: 192)

In the AND\_Lab operating system, João Fiadeiro and Fernanda Eugenio (2012) also base part of their research on the “not knowing”, on the “not wanting to know” and on the “tasting the not knowing”, making the transition from knowledge to flavor. For them, creation emerges because authors refrain from control and leadership while doing the work. Just like Hamilton, what is desired is serendipity, being able to find what is not sought or not wanted. Otherwise, similar to taste, knowledge comes with the waiting. In creation, it would then be necessary to think in real time, but inhibit any immediate thought – having the waiting, then, as a tool. Both in Julyen Hamilton’s instant composition and in AND\_Lab’s investigations, as well as in Lepecki’s conceptions, creation would not be about what I want. For Fiadeiro and Eugenio, thinking in real time is training relationships, savouring before each action, because for them every action generates one world. In search of a common plan the creation should emerge as a condition and not as a conditioning.

The idea of having “nothing for granted” or of not anticipating the end, that is, of not drawing conclusions, is also revealed as one of the principles for Hamilton’s instant composition. It seems to configure a second nature of the instant composition because we will never have much control of what is going to be achieved in terms of materials that are being created and organized in the interpreters’s body. How to be fed in this process will depend on cues and complicities that may be established while the work is happening. For example, the interpreter can “offer” or “invite” (bodily) another interpreter for a certain action or for a certain touch to occur in a region of the body indicated by him/her. The other interpreter perceives it and “accepts the proposal” or not. In the work done with Hamilton, we trained our listening and our perception to be attentive to accept the proposals, to receive the invitations and to welcome the obvious. Hamilton talks about letting ourselves be taken by the inspiration of the other. While dancing, the interpreter can come with a certain idea or clues that could create certain tensions or situations in the space. However, that doesn’t mean he/she should hold on to this idea or those clues, because the situations must also be resolved at the moment. Thus, allowing to empty and not drawing conclusions becomes the most important. The interpreter must also be able to update all the time because there is no command to



be followed, there is no way to tell our co-dancers what my idea was and what they should do. When we remove the language of the equation in the instant composition everything gains strenght, it is also this way that the work with objects achieve another dimension.

In this sense, there is something very similar to AND\_Lab's philosophy which is giving up control as a possible way for materials to be created. In the relationship that is established among the interpreters in Hamilton's instant composition and in Fiadeiro and Eugenio's work, there would be no way of forcing the other to read what we have in mind. The only mechanism would be, then, the use of a sense of interpretation.

In AND\_Lab's research, taking a second position (or movement) is always the one that will suggest a direction, being important, then, to follow the direction of the movement proposed by whom I am working with and therefore seeking the construction of a common plan. The construction of a common plan in AND\_Lab's research is equivalent to a sense-direction and not a sense-meaning, and it happens from the confirmation of a shared direction (Fiadeiro & Eugenio 2012 ). In AND\_Lab's game as well as in Hamilton's instant composition led by him and his interpreters, the wish of the dancer should always be questioned.

### *3. Banal in terms of structure but great at that moment and be ready to cry*

Another recurring factor in Julyen Hamilton's instant composition is the work with "not throwing away" a choreographic material. So he tells us: "I really congratulate you for this work because you didn't jump to another choreography. Anyone can do this choreography, it wasn't very difficult. But letting this choreography remain in the piece and not throwing it away is for me a good job" (Hamilton 2015).

The aspect of "being ready to have pleasure from the piece and with the piece; being ready to cry; to watch and be watched", came from a dancer's cry that breaks out in one of the instant compositions made from small pieces performed at the workshop. Julyen Hamilton (2015) says, then, that it is important to go deep into our personal feelings: to challenge ourselves and to dare be touched, that is, to be able to be affected by a relationship. About the public, he says: "they pay us to be touched. Therefore, we have to practice this at the time of the performance – to be touched". He stresses, however, that the amount of these feelings that we show depends on the theatre style. Hence, we have some traditions that show much, others that use a mask. For Erin Manning (2009: 21), "when the moviments make us laugh (or cry), this laughter captures the singular interval, activating its relevance above the nexus. We feel the movement moving us". Finally, the beauty and something profound in art is, for Hamilton (2015), "to see real feelings and not just to have the idea of it", which in turn merges with the tradition of the performance art distancing itself from theatrical presentations . Thus, Hamilton comments about the theatre's physical space and the relationship with the physiological body of the dancers where there's the agency of the dancing body again, not through an idea, but through a deep understanding of dance and choreographic becomings:



Good theatres have other places under the stage and a high and wide ceiling. Going through the dancing body and the mind in these high and low places: it is where inspiration comes from and where intuition starts. Something that cannot be done in a rational way. This action can be smooth or full of fear, like an animal. Like something you eat to survive. Like an animal that realizes it will be dead and tries to survive. This space doesn't come from an invention, it comes from a deep spirit of the body. It is not a good idea for a text. This understanding comes from dance. We gain access through dancing. (Hamilton, 2015).

### Final considerations

In the process of the instant composition there seems to be room for the integration of different experiences of the dancer, for building his/her corporeality and choreographic becomings. These concepts are linked with elements such as “quality of movement”, “presence” and class performances, combining imagination, listening, body consciousness, etc., as well as its aftermath moments or cool-down, training and warm-up. All these notions can be found at Hamilton's work as categories merged together. The result is the jumble of the borders between training and scene work. This path is travelled during classes and workshops for us to go from improvisation exercises to composition in a more elaborated level. There is, therefore, choreographic and performative moments that happen and that could perfectly happen in a public performance, as when we see a performer achieve a certain body state or a touch that happens at the right time forming a strong image, for example. That is to say, there can often be an event when two bodies meet and there is a huge body area that could be touched, and if the touch happens the event occurs, the image is created, a story is told, a choreography is consolidated.

The dancer's corporeality doesn't form according to choreographer's model, in this case, Julyen Hamilton's. Strictly speaking, in Hamilton's instant composition there is no model. However, for him, even the reprehensible patterns are welcome:

I hope that they (the interpreters) bring these patterns to the piece [...]. Life is full of habits. Like any training we want to create habits. [...] Not that kind of habit that imposes perceptions, but having certain dance habits. I want these habits. Otherwise we would say ‘oh, my God! Nature is full of patterns, winter again?!’ It's not smart to deny it. (Hamilton 2015).

Similarly, Hamilton criticizes the idea that we should always surprise ourselves as creators and with our movements. For him, the idea of surprising connects with the idea of drawing conclusions about what is being done, which doesn't apply, as we saw above in his proposals. For Gonçalo M. Tavares (Culturgest 2014, workshop “Panos”) the structure of surprise is an instant, a moment of great intensity that exhausts in few seconds. The problem of the surprise would be the fact that we don't die immediately afterwards, because as the surprise runs out easily and we keep alive, it would be necessary one surprise each second to achieve any effect.

For Hamilton, the right place to be is where there are no conclusions. Otherwise, drawing





conclusions is stopping the flow which Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1975) talks about. Thus, according to Turner (1979), after Csikszentmihalyi, the flow is a state in which actions are followed by actions in conformity with an internal logic that doesn't seem to need any conscious intervention on our part. Hence, action and consciousness would be experienced as one single attribute. There would be therefore little distinction between the self and the environment, between stimulus and response or between past, present and future. That is, the actor immersed in the activity of the game, with full engagement, would be able to transcend the sense of self and lose the sense of time.

Hamilton (2015) also speaks of confidence – how to have confidence in the images that come to us, in the stories that happen in the body, in the angles, in the moments of staying and in the moments of departure. Fiadeiro and Eugenio (2012) speak about going against a dominant logic that operates in daily life, and so moving from certainty to trust, from expectation to waiting, from conditioning to condition.

In instant composition there is a thought and practice of valuing each movement, making it “dear”, not simply “doing by doing”, so that we guide ourselves, then, to be more specific and to individualize every movement. After that we guide our mind and feelings, but not the emotions.

There is also an issue at improvisation that is the possibility of becoming very busy facing the assumption that we are able to do everything. So there are risks of sinking in pleasure or ecstasy of the infinite possibility of being able to move. The work's objective is not to fall into this trap but to get tools that allow us to see how one can use certain materials and put them in a play.

Having the awareness of acting with such specificity can then decide if we will work an arm and then a leg, for we don't need to move all the body to know that everything in the body is moving. Thus, between one movement and another it is possible to observe details and differences. It is possible to create material and discover it while “he speaks”, that is, try not to decide before it ends but experience the serendipity bringing a whole work of listening, attention, body awareness, in the present of the movement, being able to capture something that can sometimes be choreographic.

It is interesting to observe the relationship of the artistic field and teaching, how both seem to be subject to a thorough biographical, identity and personal mark: “This happens because, when dealing with objects of ephemeral nature, their own rules and codes are established through the conventions that are every moment enacted by the authors/creators...” (Bucchieri 2011: 26). Luigi Pareyson (1993), in turn, considers that art is the expressive form of the artist's personality. This seems important in extent that the body practices studied are directly linked to the choreographer Hamilton and, therefore, to his own stories and cultural background.

Hamilton's instant composition involves a plurality of methods which may also be transformed into tools, which appear to be central to sustain the individual and his creative work, as well as the collective work. These pedagogies are appropriate proposals to stimulate “creativity, imagination, individuality, in the subjectivity of the experience from a set of principles as a source of content, and also as a problem-solving approach in which the teacher assumes the guiding function and the student acts as an agent of his own tuition” (Alves 2007: 11).

In Hamilton's practices and instantaneous composition there are, however, a dilution of rigid



images of what would be theory and practice, reflection and action, philosophy and dance, voice and body. Dilution done through doing it. Therefore, what is sought is the specific corporeality of each one to get to the art level, escaping from normative patterns to match what happens at the moment, the choreographic becomings.

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