

CONVERSATIONS IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

A Partial History of the Choreographic Process

Beth Soll

Boston University

May 1978

BETH SOLL & CO PRESENTS

CONVERSATIONS IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

Choreographed & Directed by

BETH SOLL

PROGRAM

APRIL 30

CUNNINGHAM STUDIO - NYC

SOLO 1

...Music J.S.Bach

SUSAN DOWLING

LIGHT DANCE

SUSAN DOWLING, JUDITH CHAFFEE

ILONA LAPPO, BETH SOLL

SOLO 11

ANN BROWN

SUSAN DOWLING, ILONA LAPPO

DUET

...Music G.Gershwin

JUDITH CHAFFEE, ANN BROWN, MICHAEL MEYER

PRISM

...Music J.S.Bach

BETH SOLL

ENDDANCE

THE COMPANY

PRODUCTION STAFF

Lighting Design.....CRAIG MILLER
Stage Manager.....MARA WILLIAMS
Production Assn't.....STEVEN ROBINSON
Tapes.....DAVID BROWN
Flyer Design.....MICHAEL MOSER
Flyer Photographs.....MICHAEL MOSER
...MARK LENNIHAN

SPECIAL THANKS TO SUSAN SOLLINS & BEVERLY EMMONS.

We are grateful to those who sponsored this performance.

Conversations in a Foreign Language was choreographed with great care and difficulty. Choreographing a dance always involves grappling with staggering practical problems, but, in this case, the major difficulty lay in the overwhelming richness of my source material. When I began working on this dance, I was filled with conscious memories of experiences from both the recent and distant past, all of which rattled alarmingly in my mind while resisting choreographic expression. Resistance is an acknowledged contributor to the creative process, and, in this case, its ultimate contribution was dependent on my determination to be aware of all the associations related to my experiences and on my commitment to denying nothing. I knew the danger of such a commitment; I knew that the struggle to adhere to it would shape the work, force it to be awkward and daring. In describing the making of this dance, I cannot describe all of the circumstantial, remembered and associative material with which I worked; therefore, I will include a description of only those events and factors that contributed most obviously to the process and the final result. The highly charged associative powers of these events have provided an enormous store of references for each moment of Conversations and have therefore enriched even the most inconsequential movements in the same mysterious way that a lifetime can be revealed in a subtle facial expression.

The first moment of certainty that I had an idea for a new dance occurred in the Berkshires at Tanglewood. I was sitting on an open lawn under an oppressive sun. A group of tourists walked past, speaking softly. With unexpected clarity they grouped themselves in a pattern of breathtaking expressivity. One

person stood with a camera, photographing two or three others, who stood about twelve feet from him with that peculiar held energy of those presenting their image rather than themselves. Five others walked about twenty feet from the photographer, talking. All together they created a not quite straight diagonal line. They were bound together by the enigmatic force of their social relationships, by the little black camera's suggestion of eternity, by the tension and grace of the surrounding greenery, and by the natural circumscription of my perception. I immediately recognized the importance of this scene.

Initially, my attraction to this scene was merely intuitive; later, I recognized an interest in narcissism, especially as it is expressed in photography. A photograph does not immortalize the self; instead it captures an image of the self and not merely one image, but a potentially infinite number of identical images or reflections of the original object. I was interested, too, in the human desire to re-create the self in the form of tangible objects and reflections in a manner that permits and even celebrates a confusion of the self with the image. These apparently intellectual concerns were all laden with intense emotion and, at the time that I viewed this scene, were shaped by the context: I was in a strange place watching people whom I did not know enacting a drama that emerged as such only because of the coincidence of my presence and an event that contained so much of what preoccupied me.

Two weeks later I began to study tap dancing and wore shoes, which, like the camera, were shiny and black. Tap dancing felt like that scene: casual, tense, objective. I was interested in

tap because of its elegance, its freedom and nonchalance, its association with film, and its purity. Because I was injured I stopped the classes, but I remembered what I had learned. Seven months later, I quickly choreographed a simple, short tap dance, which relies on both the traditional fast tap movement and the slow, careful movement more often found in modern dance styles. When I perform this tap interlude, I feel as if I am truly dancing.

Several weeks later I flew to Europe. The flight was extraordinarily serene. I felt surrounded by luminescent blue that held me silent and swift within it. This presaged the happiness of the final work. I re-experienced it in performance: a melting white softness, a feeling of being a bird illuminated by a brilliant light that was sensed rather than seen.

I stayed first in London. There I experienced another moment of inspired certainty. I was sitting by the front window of my cousin's house, looking out at the twilight, which held the usual clarity and peacefulness, despite the disturbance of heavy clouds tearing across the sky, creating shadows that darkened and challenged the green of the trees. I was listening to the jazz Bach music of Jacques Loussiers. Across the street, a boy in white shorts and a red shirt ran past with an astounding swiftness that was undisturbed by the slightly irregular pattern of his steps and the occasional bending of his torso. I saw him in the context of the rushing traffic, the tearing clouds, the luminosity of the twilight, and the combination of wildness and English decorum that encompassed me there inside the house. I was conscious of the power of the scene and later I wrote somewhat illegibly:

Idea: overwhelming (happiness?)

- Jazz Bach
- sense of memory of moments when felt love. fullness.
 - Dancing with X
 - circle of love with X
- etc. !

Sitting at Lorna's window - across street Boy in white shorts
and red shirt -

-running quick step.
hesitating.
-stops to touch ground
-runs quicker uneven steps
-runs again - away
-moment of perfect, breathtaking
god clarity

Jacques Loussiers - playing
piano.

Must look into

In September - after returning from Europe -- I choreographed
a fast locomotor phrase of sixteen counts, which was included
in three of the dances in Conversations. The choreographed move-
ment is stylistically more complex than when I originally saw it.
It includes traditional dance movements, some changes of direction,
and some subtly difficult aerial movements.

The English combination of freedom and propriety released
something in me so that when I arrived in Paris I was unprepared
for the very defined Latin culture, the ironic, passionate look
of the people, and the discreteness of the cultural artifacts.
A car accident happened outside my great-aunt's house immediately

after my arrival. The accident was not fatal, but it left its victim, the driver, sitting in his car, his hands over his eyes to catch the blood pouring from the wounds made by the broken glass. He sat so still he seemed to be dead. My aunt, who carries with her the horror of two wars, watched greedily; so did I for a moment, but quickly the moment was too filled with meaning because my great uncle had died since my last visit. I turned away, but later I felt compelled to look again. The man had been lifted from the car and was sitting on a stretcher, his hands still over his eyes, crying blood tears. He was alive, but I felt as if, for the first time, I had witnessed and confronted death.

For the next few days my aunt and I argued and talked about death, the wars, my uncle, her daughter. Paris was miserably rainy and wet. I was experiencing an awful rage, which was relieved only when I went to an exhibition of Henry Moore's work. I saw then that art was necessary because, in its irreverence, its denial of all that is and its affirmation of itself, it is both a denunciation of the horror of death and a celebration of its ruthless inevitability. I felt the sky as a canopy over all of time, in particular the time of war, so that I experienced being a part of all that had happened. My head ached from the pressure of the hate, the battling, but I became forever after committed to finding a way out of it. It was here that the dance was shaped. Here was established my desire to destroy the enormous inner culture that I had built as a defense, even a rationale for my hate and fear.

After three days of struggling, I woke up early and went to

the train station. I was going to Switzerland. I sat in the train waiting for it to depart and watched the complex public scene which contained both the outer clearly motivated activity - departures and arrivals - and the personal, detailed behaviors expressive of the struggle with the potential loss, the happiness, and the anger associated with leave-takings and meetings. Across from me on another train two young people pulled down the window and leaned on it, their arms folded. The sunlight streamed in from behind them, illuminating their hair and defining, hallowing their apparently ordinary stance. Eventually, they slowly sat down opposite each other. Again, I was transfixed as if I had seen something of unparalleled importance. When I choreographed this movement into a duet for a man and a woman, I varied the timing and the details of the sitting down motions. It was perhaps there at the train station that I began to be consciously fascinated with the light that surrounds and brightens all that we perceive; perhaps this moment presaged my later dedication to finding abstract (danced) images of the light, which, because it illuminates and contains human experience, can reflect and make manifest that experience.

After leaving Paris, I went to Bern, Switzerland, where I was unable to throw off the weight of the Parisian experiences. The sense of Swiss propriety, which was only intensified by the soaring mountains, oppressed me even more. It was not until I arrived in Hungary that I began to believe in the possibility of working creatively again. There, I stayed with old friends - a family. They appeared to love me in some way, perhaps precisely because they saw my struggle. I began then to know a tentative but extreme happiness. We went dancing every night, and I started dancing wherever I was, often angrily, more often out of an

inexpressible restlessness, and occasionally because of my happiness and desire to fill the sphere of light there. In the day the sun is hot and dry. The twilight that follows the day of intense brilliance modulates the daytime brightness without depleting it. In the serene, clear evenings, the family played tennis in a shaded park. I danced in an area near by. I began to choreograph and write down what I found, although I knew that most of this material, choreographed in a state of undefined happiness rather than in the necessary one of painfully objective ecstasy, was too self-indulgent to keep. Later, I did throw out much of this material, but I kept certain simple movements, which I introduced into other contexts. When we visited Lake Balaton, I did not choreograph, but later I choreographed material based on imagistic motion memories culled from the strange light reflected from the flat lake, the spindly chairs that are scattered across the lake as resting places for the waders, the frantic games of water soccer and badminton we played, the continuous eating and drinking, and the shape of my relationships with my friends.


All of these experiences contained by the light that was both gentle and immensely revealing were set in relief by the dramas within the family that had so generously taken me in. Again I felt as if I were experiencing all of human experience in the microcosm of that family in which the ancient contests for love and power were played out. What distinguished the struggles of this family was that they were pursued with enthusiasm, and, although each battle left its victims, the wisdom of several of the family members prevented any irrevocable destruction. This

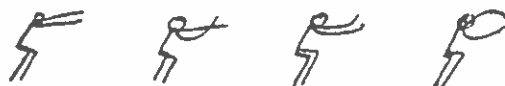
affirmative interaction inspired me as no visual image ever had: it meant that I would not have to create singlehandedly and out of nothing a new world in defiance of my tortured inner universe, but that I had life to go by, a model. In addition, although I was in Hungary only a week and a half, I was given enough so that my inner world was permanently changed; therefore I had the beginnings of an even more visible model for my work - one that, because it belonged to me, I could scrutinize mercilessly and lovingly.

I left Hungary sated. The clutter of misery in me left no room for additional happiness. With what I had, I flew lightly, exultantly back home. The trip to Europe, which seemed so full, created a tension between the sense of freedom and happiness it offered and me. The trip provided me with an artistic motive, a mood, a sense of light and strength. It helped focus my interests in language, gesture, sanity, and the function of art. It contrasted brutally with my everyday life. This contrast made the dance happen. My weak self was challenged, irritated and no longer functioned for me. With alarming clarity, I perceived hate, grief and general emotional dissonance in the people around me, and I found it intolerable. I started to work, ruthlessly stealing movement expressive of aberrational qualities and shaping them into dances which were both an homage to the people from whom I stole and a cruel sacrifice. In this way I attempted to destroy and transcend the manifestation of what I perceived as evil.

At about this time, I saw the movie, Aguirre, the Wrath of God, by Herzog. I recognized in it a quality present in my

earlier work: one of beautifully expressed tension - the tension of waiting, of the denial and the accumulation of rage, but a rage expressive not only of the need to be loved but also of the thwarted desire to love. The movie was about paralysis, which, although ultimately destructive, held in it many vital, positive motions moving in opposition. Several times in the film, Aguirre, the man living out his legacy of evil, stands thoughtfully and distractedly listening to the tentative, barely audible flute-song of an innocent aged man. As he plays, the old man moves haltingly; Aguirre's eyes wander and he appears lost in a memory of both happiness and delusions of power.

When I watched this scene, the word "telling" appeared in my mind; immediately I wrote down several movement ideas involving two women walking toward and away from the audience, sometimes in unison, sometimes not; one falling, the other remaining upright; one talking, the other listening inattentively; both talking at once; without comprehension. The communication was never to be fulfilled. The women would reflect each other; their paths would cross, meet and rebound but never with a sense of contact. The two languages of the women would be alien and only partially functional - eliciting an incomplete listening. Shortly after I saw this film, I began to associate this dance with the image of a venetian blind - a blind that both reveals and obscures, that lets light in and out in flickering, unpredictable, but primarily linear patterns:  I put these patterns into this duet (Light Dance) and into my solo (Prism). In Prism I use my arms to represent the lines of light, moving them very quickly to create the illusion of shimmering:



In Light Dance, the two women walk, using these linear patterns as a spatial organization for their walks. As they walk, their arms move in various patterns based on gestures that occur during speech, especially those gestures that appear to be unconnected to their spoken counterparts. The light images co-exist with the human element; the two elements intermingle, separate and join throughout the piece. However, the abstract light images predominate as a source for the duet's structure.

At this time, I saw three other scenes that I incorporated into Light Dance. On an outdoor, artificial athletic field set amid the industrial ruin that serves as the context for Boston University, I saw two young girls, one lying, the other sitting next to her, agitatedly watching some boys play. At least one of the girls was a redhead. The setting sun shone directly on the heads of the girls, illuminating them with a light that would have been heavenly but for the irreverent red hair. I incorporated this scene into the duet also, because it was literally filled with radiance and because it stated so succinctly that peculiar energy characteristic of women who are together but alien to each other because all their energy is in watching men and in being everything that they can be to the men.

The second scene consisted of two people in a hospital hallway standing near a wall. One of the people, a man, was leaning fully on the wall; the other, a woman, was standing diagonally in front of the man, talking to him and, at the same time, tapping her hand on the wall. In Light Dance, the two women re-enact this scene precisely, but very briefly. The tapping movement is incorporated into all the other dances: sometimes one hand is lifted in the original tapping shape; sometimes one hand is lifted

as a wave; and at other times, the original tapping movement is performed. Each time the movement appears in a different context so that the way it is perceived and interpreted varies enormously.

The third scene was, in fact, a series of many tableaux I witnessed at Nahant Beach. There is a sandbar there that is revealed only when the tide comes in and surrounds this bar. When I was there, the wind came up without warning, and suddenly the beige sand was encircled by the brilliant blue water. The sand, moving in the wind, appeared to carry with it at an obscure pace, all the shining wet people sitting on it. On beaches people sit in positions and groupings that have a particular and an expressive form. In Light Dance, the dancers recreate several of these shapes and groupings.

During the entire fall I worked on movement for the dance everyday, first, doing it myself and teaching it to my students; then; trying it on my dancers and reworking it; then, teaching it again to my students; and, finally, rearranging it on my dancers. Because I was simultaneously preparing for performances of an earlier work and of unfinished pieces of Conversations, I was unable to concentrate fully on Conversations; therefore, I focused on simply mapping out the total structure. I wrote down various ideas for the dance which later determined its organization.

September 27, 1978:

I want to go deeper and yet make a sparkling jewel. I do now yearn for lightness. I want the grief, the humor, the memories to be translucent and wafted across a sun-shaded space. And the sounds too the gentle summer voices. And then just a mention of terrible, searing grief. But only a mention, followed by the quick, infinitely complex motion that takes the audience again away

and far and deep into all feeling, so deep that they hardly know it.

By this time, I had decided on the title. By mid October I had found a tentative structure for the whole dance. The first half, which, from the first, consisted of a solo for a woman, followed by a duet for two women (initially called Telling Dance; later, Light Dance), was the same in the final version, except for my short tap dance, which was not added to Light Dance until later in the winter. I saw this first half as expressive of the choreographic process - the fight for emotional clarity in an abstract context.

The tap dance, which is performed at the end of the first half, is followed by a solo for another woman and then by the Hungarian duet/trio, which is more personal and conventionally dramatic than the other dances. My solo, Prism, which follows this, is a synthesis of all the dances: it reflects all the other dance material, scatters and fractures it, connects it, separates and abstracts it to the fullest extent. In the last dance, Enddance, I attempt to make visible the multi-dimensionality of space and time and my overwhelming sense of the richness and continuity of all experience.

When I began to choreograph Conversations, I started with a solo for a friend with whom I originally planned to collaborate. When this plan was abandoned, I divided the material between a solo for myself (Prism) and a solo for another woman (Solo I). I began working on the material that later became Solo I by improvising to and singing with Charles Ives' songs, in particular to In the Mornin'. The rhythm of the beginning of the dance still reflects the conventional phrasing of the music, which,

for me, was ecstatic in a simplistic, irresistible way. Because Solo I and Prism started as one dance, I thought of them similarly: I was concerned with seductiveness, unacknowledged exhibitionism, tantrums, prayer, waltzing, badminton and jogging. I planned to deal with everything. Very early in the choreographic process, I wrote:

September 10

Disjointed ideas, lack of flow - interspersed with flow. Some simultaneity. Much isolation - separateness. Sometimes on same screen. Otherwise on smooth empty lake. I have no vision this time - this dance will fail interestingly, it will be like Scenes from a Marriage (Bergman), disjointed pieces of brilliance with no(?) underlying connection except a deep wonderment at human behavior.

despair

amusement confusion

Solo - images from Europe

- glimpse of love, of absolute beauty, death, decadence, happiness - but separate from life.

My Solo

e.g. walk down the street.

- 1 level - Thoughts, memories, fantasies, etc.
- 2 level - events, perceived unconsciously/.consciously
- 3 level - events perceived as material for dance.
- 4 level - events perceived but allegedly dropped as material but unwittingly included as part

of:

Total dynamic gestalt
which includes

- present, past and allusions

& illusions re[→] to both and small parts which contribute to Whole which I don't perceive.

-rhythm

-humidity

-sounds - ideas re sound - the song

always going through my head.

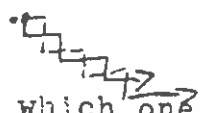
Can't do everything simultaneously
Must however give that sense -
at same time achieve absolutely
spare, simple quality.
isolated

As I worked, I was repeatedly drawn to the idea of mirroring, the light necessary for reflections, reflected light, the reversals of mirrors and the invulnerability of glass. I decided to express this idea more subtly too, so I asked a dancer who moves with a unique quality of fragility and tension to act as an echoic figure in the dance - one who would, in a gently prismatic manner, perform a muted, incomplete version of the others' material as an acknowledgment of the impossibility of accurate repetition and of the inexactness of records.

Solo I, Light Dance and Prism are the dances in which I explore my interests in mirroring and light. Duet, which I think of as my Hungarian Dance, is ostensibly a love duet; however, it also serves as a context for other choreographic concerns. Immediately before the duet, a woman performs a solo that is a danced version of my flight to Europe. It contains much stillness and falling, diving movement. These movements are performed in a small space; they do not look free. They are juxtaposed with a very short section of freer, more conventional dance movement that leads into Duet. The solo figure remains present during the duet, moving continuously and quietly, at times literally watching the duet and at other times blending with it. Her simultaneous proximity and distance from the dance is a literal

expression of the necessity for the choreographer to be both inside and outside of experience. In the middle of this duet/trio other dancers enter and arrange themselves in the long diagonal line of the photograph scene - the scene which served as the initial inspiration for Conversations. Again, the solo figure remains separate from the scene, watching it, as I did originally. The scene interrupts the duet's relatively familiar, dramatic content, thus linking the issues of mirroring, narcissism and the duplication of images to the psychological aspects of the duet/trio. After the enactment of the photograph scene, the dance continues, and the solo figure, no longer so separate, dances with the other dancers.

In November I flew to Colorado for my sister's wedding. The smooth, soaring flight, the patterned Coloradan terrain and the high altitude affected me violently: I felt as if my mind were shot through with clarity; I could not stop thinking or writing. I began to understand fully the connection between the light images and the psychological factors underlying the choreography. On the airplane I became fascinated with the television sets, which showed only interference or distorted pictures. Because I could see two or three television sets at once, I was able to study the rhythms and designs created by the similarities and differences in the sets. I was drawn immediately to the idea of interference - of one light image interfering with another or of one person interfering with another. I discovered that the video lines resembled the lines in which the two women walk in Light Dance. I added broken lines to the dance. The dancers did quick little walks that crossed and

literally interfered with each other:  In addition, I choreographed two short segments in which one dancer stands in front of another with arms outstretched and tilts them forward and back in a stylized blocking movement. In performance, I perceived both the video and the psychological content of these movements.

At my sister's wedding, we all danced. My sister knows how to jig, which she did, despite the formality of her dress and the wreath of flowers balanced precariously on her head. My brother danced next to her doing a Russian step. His arms were folded on his chest. He kept his knees very bent and kicked out one leg, then the other. My sister's merriment, my brother's restrained joy, the incongruity in their heights, and the sheer pleasure of those watching enraptured me. I whisked the material quickly to my dance and put it in the duet/trio. The two women jig standing up; the man dances it close to the floor. The Gershwin piece, Sweet and Low Down, accompanies this section. The jig is formalized joy sparkling in the classiness of Gershwin, but it also evokes for me, because of the feet stomping into the floor, a stylized fury that is expressed with similar movement in the tap dance.

By the middle of December, I had almost completed a rough draft of the entire concert. At the rehearsal immediately before the holidays I was struck by the weaknesses of the piece and by my difficulties in communicating the material to the performers. I re-examined the material, particularly that of the duet for one man and two women, but I was unable to find a way out of the difficulties. I was certain that the dance was doomed and that

I had to throw it out and start to work more simply, by myself. I worked everyday on my solo, Prism, but I refused to think about the other dances. After two weeks my courage returned, and cautiously I began to work on the piece again. Before I met with the dancers, I had determined all the changes and had finally choreographed the last dance. I met with the dancers toward the end of January, and within two weeks, the concert was completed. The feeling of hopelessness had forced me to face all that I had evaded in the initial choreography. I struggled to clarify each moment and to avoid falseness. The difficulty in doing this is with me still: in each rehearsal and before each performance I experience unspeakable resistance to clarity and confrontation. More and more often, however, I am able to feel the joy in the dance.