

Talk this Dance:

On the Conceptualisation of Dance as Fictive Conversation

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As a means of expression, the unequivocally physical experience of dance is typically construed and spoken about in communicative terms, as a ‘conversation between body and soul,’ a ‘dialogue between dancers,’ or a means to ‘tell a story’ to an audience (Pascual and Brandt 2015; Brandt 2015). This chapter analyses this metaphor through a case study of Tiago Rodrigues’ choreography *A Perna Esquerda de Tchaikovski* (‘Tchaikovsky’s Left Leg’). In this performance a ballerina engages in different interactions: (i) with the audience, to whom she tells her life story; (ii) with the pianist on stage, who silently complies with her requests; and most remarkably (iii) with her own body, which she presents as the locus of autobiographical memory and of ‘thinking with the body’ (Kirsch 2011).

The Conversation Structure of the Performance

Tchaikovsky’s Left Leg, written and staged by playwright Tiago Rodrigues, premiered on February 5th, 2015 at Teatro Camões, the headquarters of the Portuguese National Ballet, in Lisbon. The performance is about a prima ballerina, Barbora Hruskova, who plays herself, dancing the remembrance of episodes in her life and career. By revealing the hard work, the pains and pleasures of dance, the piece also tells the story of any dancer. Hruskova is accompanied by pianist Mário Laginha, the composer of the piece’s original music.

As the viewers arrive, the dancer warms up on stage and the pianist tunes the piano. The lights go down and the dancer walks to the front and greets the audience:¹

[0:7:10] Good evening. The show has not yet started. This is the moment before the show. I like to come early to the stage. I like to be on stage before the show. I like to be on stage when only the piano tuner is here [*points to pianist*]. [...] I enjoy listening to the piano being tuned. It is not yet music. It is the

promise of music. I warm up my body to the sound of the promise of music. Warming up is not yet dance. It is the promise of dance.

The choreography is self-referential, a form of meta-theatre: it is a performance about performing that grants an unusual view of pre-show work. The first overall enunciation frame is thus set up: the ballerina performs before an audience and addresses them in speech. Why she does so gradually becomes clear: this is a confessional piece about her story as a prima ballerina at the end of her career. The dancer has an autobiographical narrative intent, which she delivers both in the performed gestural modality of dance and in the verbal enunciation modality of theatre. Moreover, the story she is about to tell and perform, her own, metonymically represents stories of other dancers, the story of a career in dance.

This opening also presents the identity of the pianist, no longer the established well-known, but a mere piano tuner. She addresses him as ‘tuner Siegfried’, intentionally blending his dual identity on stage:

[0:45:05] [*Dancer turns to pianist*] “Music!” [*Pianist runs to piano and begins to play*] [...]
 [0:50:35] “Thank you, tuner Siegfried. Now your solo.”

The ballerina recalls that she once danced *Swan Lake*, and asks the pianist to play Prince Siegfried, the male protagonist in this ballet, and accompany her performance. Her purpose is to demonstrate the inherent difficulty of classical choreography, the challenges it imposed on her body.

Apart from the direct actual communication with audience and pianist, the dancer engages right from the beginning in an imagined interaction with her body, presented as an independent organism:

[0:10:54] My body and I, we are two different people. We live together, we work together but we are different. When I warm up I talk to my body and my body has several parts. I talk to each of these parts.

Throughout the piece the ballerina’s body is staged as her interlocutor:

[0:20:25] Before my last performance, I spoke at length with my feet. They said: “Enough! We want to rest. We want retirement!” I said: “Just one more time! Please hang in there, my dears, just one more time. Hang in there! And then we will run!”, and now here I am. And my feet say: “Again? You had promised it was the last time!” And I say: “Just this last one, my dears. And then we can run forever.” And my feet say: [*Music resumes, dancer begins to walk intently and run; music intensifies as she gains speed, running in circles. Running changes to dance*]

This is a clear example of *fictive interaction* (Pascual 2014, Pascual and Sandler 2016), “the use of the conversation as a frame to structure mental, discursive, and linguistic processes” (Pascual 2014, 9). In this performed conversation, the feet not only reply to the dancer in a turn-taking sequence, but are also endowed with emotional states, which they express verbally. They vent their discontent and reinforce this with action: as the dancer begins to assertively walk and gradually turns to running, the effect on stage is as though her feet have acquired a life of their own, dictating what is to happen next. Since bodily motion is central to dance, the feet are metaphorically given their own voice, protesting the regime of their owner through enunciation.² The speech ascribed to the ballerina’s feet is naturally not actual, and it is not fictitious either—the dancer does not set up a fantasy world in which body parts can speak. Rather, the feet’s words are *fictive* in the sense of Talmy ([1996] 2000), they need to be construed as non-genuine, inhabiting a realm between reality and fiction, but serving the purpose of the actual narrative in the here-and-now. By animating her body with its own will and voice, the dancer demonstrates the dynamics of physical forces that have defined her life and now frame the end of her career. If by dancing she expresses emotion to the audience, by fictively conversing with her body she gives these emotional states an explicit narrative context. The quoted fictive conversation between dancer and body is staged for discursive purposes, for the benefit of the audience, the ultimate receivers of the performance’s message.³

Critically, this piece is *not* one more instance of dance *as* dialogue (Pascual and Brandt 2015, Brandt 2015), it is literally about dialogue *in* dance. It shows the centrality of the Conversational Frame for making sense of autobiographical experience, it becomes communicable and suitable for mnemonic reconstruction. But why should the staged dialogue between an *I* and a *you* be more engaging, perhaps more effective, than a descriptive narrative in the first person? Note that the very process of memory retrieval may be considered a negotiation between different perspectives on (selected pieces of) the past events reconstructed—the situated perspective of the subject that experiences them as they unfold and the same subject that recalls them from the viewpoint of a later time (Abrantes 2010a, 137ff.). The coexistence of perspectives in this piece is consistent with work in Cognitive Science and Cognitive Linguistics on the non-pathological consideration of two irreconcilable realities (conceptual blending) as well as mixed viewpoints. For instance, we also often talk to ourselves when there is nobody in the room – but ourselves – to listen (cf. Mead [1934]

1955; Dennett 1996, 147-152; Rosenthal 2012), which involves a split-self engaged in conversation. The conceptualization and linguistic presentation of the self and the self's consciousness, or different parts of the self, as different parts of one's personality or opinions) as separate –and interacting with each other– is in fact extremely common in the constant perspective shift of discourse (e.g. Dancygier, Lu and Verhagen 2016), in both literary and everyday language (Pascual 2002, 2014: ch 1, Pascual and Sandler 2016: ch 1). **Linguistic examples are** expressions such as ‘If I were you, I would...’ or ‘I’m not myself today’ (Lakoff 1996; Fauconnier and Turner 2002; Abrantes 2010b); “I said to myself”, “This is the linguist in me speaking”, “A part of me says ..., part of me...” (Pang 2005).

The life story of a dancer can best be told in this manner. It is both the story as lived and the story as seen by others. If in an autobiographic narrative tension arises from the coexistence of the Olympic perspective of the older telling *I* and the recalled, younger, experiencing self, in the case of a performer, the latter self is already split between an ‘inside out’ perspective confronted with the ‘outside in’ look of others. These are intertwined, as described by the performer herself:

[30:18] The mirror. The mirror helps you. The mirror is with you every day. [...] The mirror becomes part of your thinking. You think mirror. You think about yourself as another looking at you. You are yourself and also the one in the mirror.

This passage shows the performing self and the conceptualisation of the self from an outside and inside perspective simultaneously (cf. Pascual 2014, 3-5, Pascual and Sandler 2016, 5-6). Here, the dancer's self is conceptually separated from her own body, with which she can then interact, and it is her body that imposes its own rhythms on the self's will. The Conversational Frame models the experience of multiple perspectives and demonstrates the ballerina's life as this permanent conceptual intersubjective tension between inner experience and external viewpoint. It helps make sense of it and convey it as a story that is both told and performed. Thus, whereas the basic principles of embodied cognition cannot be denied, it seems that cognition is not only shaped by our experiences with the physical world, but also by our social lives.

The dancer's body in *Tchaikovsky's Left Leg* is the ideal interlocutor for triggering the autobiographical narrative. The ballerina's legs, feet, arms, and back take turns in ‘arguing’ with her, and from it accessing

significant moments in her past, reaching as far back as her childhood. Choreographer Tiago Rodrigues says of the piece that it is about ‘the memory of the body’. As an ‘interlocutor’ in this fictive interaction, the body allows mediation, because it both *carries* the memory and performs it by *marking* relevant stages in the recall.

The way this ballerina condenses significant moments and events of her career in the performance and in the narrative is similar to the technique of marking movement sequences in dance. This involves schematically ‘performing’ movement at much smaller scale (e.g. using gestures and only some parts of the body to represent full-fledged choreographies). Apart from the obvious advantage of sparing the body strenuous effort, this technique may be used to convey movement sequences to others and negotiate them; help dancers situate themselves in the choreography and memorise sequences. Marking is thus the production of a compressed model of the movement, situated between regular practice of the real movement sequence and the mental simulation of that movement in the dancer’s mind. As a rehearsal technique, marking relies on embodiment, i.e. the bodily basis of thought and the way we make sense of the world by relying on the experience of navigating this world in a material body. Marking also relies on distributed or extended cognition, i.e. the ability to transfer or offload mental content to external forms of symbolisation (cf. Hutchins 1995; Kirsch 2011). The body thus becomes a material anchor (Hutchins 2005), a metonymic marker of the performer’s memory, akin to the use of fingers for counting (Hutchins 2005). Marking seems even most similar to so-called constructed actions in signed languages, in which different body parts may symbolically stand for different referents, showing mixed viewpoints simultaneously (cf. Liddell 1995, 2003; Aarons and Morgan 2003; Dudis 2004; Jarque and Pascual 2015).

Throughout the performance the ballerina stages segments of choreographies she has danced, granting the lay viewer privileged access to the strenuous technique, the body’s proprioception, and the dancer’s emotions, which normally remain hidden. Occasionally she uses marking to convey sequences of movements she does not dance, repeating them with her hands instead of her feet:

[33:15] [*Dancer names and performs miniature classical ballet steps with her hands; pianist reproduces, echoes on the piano the melody of her speech*]: Réverence. Posé, rond de jambes. Piqué, soutenu, developpée devant, bourré, bourré, bourré...

The whole performance could yet be regarded in the same terms: a sequenced alternation of movements and segments from the choreographies she has performed and the body as the vehicle of this autobiographic marking. This understanding relies on the strategy of conceptual metonymy or referential pinpointing, already present in the title of the piece: the left leg is a reference to the particular strength and effort demanded of this limb in the classical choreographies of Tchaikovsky's ballet, and as such it is representative of the effort demanded from the body of a classical ballerina. Sensations of pain, scars, permanent injuries are the traces of a prior experience, and as such the path to recall a different performance and with it a different time, space, and audience:

[1:18:00] Each pain in my body corresponds to a show. I've been dancing for 30 years now, so I have a great collection of pains. This is *Prokofiev's* foot. This is the hip of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. This is the finger of *Carmina Burana*. This is Händel's coccyx. This is the knee of *Sylphide*.

The collection of pains is the collection of memories that the dancer reconstructs in dialogue as the episodes of her own story, they represent cause-effect compressions of her career. In the performance, both marking and metonymy are supported by indexical hints, marks of spatial and modal deixis:

[1:03:35] Makarova does this with her leg. [*Dancer demonstrates the movement*] This is *Swan Lake*. It's perfect.

[39:28] And the arms must close without effort, like wings. But mine only close until here. [*Dancer demonstrates the movement*] So I practiced for hours and hours to be able to lift my arm and keep the neck free. Because this is the position of the swan. [*Dancer demonstrates*]

She demonstrates in dance what she tells in speech, thereby integrating dance and dialogue. As an interlocutor in the fictive interaction, the body is often animated into a discordant conversation partner. As the carrier of memory, it bears the traces of past events, recounted verbally and demonstrated with movement, marking with and through the body the core moments of the ballerina's remembered life.

Engaging with a Performance: The Staged Conversation as a Trigger for Empathy

The Conversation Frame as an underlying conceptual tool may be employed for discourse purposes. In this case, the fictive interaction involves dancer (the locator) and her body (a fictive counterpart), and the unfolding turn-taking occurs before the audience, a third participant who is not directly involved but is invited to take a position. This triadic channel of fictive communication, which is reminiscent of the typical in courtroom interaction (Pascual 2014, chaps. 6, 7), makes the case for the demonstrative and argumentative nature of this conceptual structure.

Narrative is foundational in the way we construe reality, experience, and memory (Bruner 1991), and it is moreover a condition for empathic involvement (Breithaupt 2009, chap. 4). Stories are basic structures for making sense of experience, as they allow for the retrospective causal linking of past events and multiple perspective-taking. A narrative, whether autobiographical or fictional, a private one or one for an external audience, often unfolds as the dynamic interplay of opposing forces, inviting the taking of sides (Breithaupt 2009, 152 ff.). Following Breithaupt (2009), empathy involves perspective-taking for one of two antagonistic elements or participants in a story. Then, fictive interaction is the conceptual strategy that renders it concrete in discourse and in performance. In *Tchaikovsky's Left Leg* the triadic construction calling for empathic involvement becomes especially clear toward the end, when the dancer engages once more in an imagined conversation with her body:

[1:15:29] I don't want to stop controlling my body. I used to tell my body: "Do this, do that." And it always complied. But now my body has started to go its own way. Now my body tells me: "Don't do this, don't do that." My body tells me: "Tides rise and fall, the sun rises and sets, nature is made of beginnings and endings. And you may dance, but you are just another animal in nature." I reply to my body: "Alright, as you wish. Now you are in charge. But I warn you: We will die together. And when I die it will be like one of those old ladies, mad, wearing my ballet shoes, my tutu, and my tiara. And we shall pirouette, pirouette." [*She pirouettes*]

The contrast between then and now is underscored by the alternate dominance of the ballerina over her body in the past, her body over her in the present, and again her over her body in the future. Also, the precise distinction between first and third person (*I* vs. *my body*) is neutralised in a shared *we*, eventually submitted to the will of the dominant *I*: "We will die together [...] And we shall pirouette" (cf. Lakoff 1996, Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 1999).

The narrative experience is thus metaphorically transported to a reality alternative to one's own. Performing that reality (Gerrig 1993) adds to the narrative of one's own experience in a process of 'narrative world-making' (Hermann 2009). Then, in the case of a dance performance with integrated story-telling, there is one further dimension, as the story is not only mediated by language, but is actually demonstrated by expressive gesture. Viewers are engaged in a double and complementary way. Relying on the fundamental ability of theory of mind (Zunshine 2006), they anticipate through their own experience the performer's thoughts, behaviours, and feelings from what the performer *tells* them; and they are engaged in a 'feeling of body' (Wojciehowski and Gallese 2010), the embodied simulation of what it might be like to be that performer, triggered by what she *dances* before them. The involvement in this narrative is thus twofold, leading to an empathy (in Breithaupt's sense) that is both cognitive and affective, invited by language and by action.

The particular format and style of this dance-drama renders unusual visibility to the conceptualisation of performance as fictive interaction between (at least) performer(s) and silent audience. This allows for a multimodal engagement of the viewer with the narrative and a process of perspective-taking that results in the empathic involvement with the performer and her story.

Conclusion: More than a Metaphor, Dance as Dialogue, Dialogue in Dance

In our case study, *Tchaikovsky's Left Leg*, the Conversation Frame structures the piece on multiple levels. The dancer engages in fictive interaction with: (i) the silent audience viewing the piece; (ii) the silent pianist complying-with her requests; and (iii) her own body 'responding' and occasionally 'rebellious' against her, thereby revealing its pain. The performance stages dialogue in dance as a mechanism for triggering and sustaining autobiographic thinking throughout the performance.

As a choreography about the memory of the body, the piece makes use of marking as a strategy for simulated movement, with the body as a carrier of memories (scars, pains, etc.). Moreover, in *Tchaikovsky's Left Leg* a solo dancer's body encloses a double perspective as onlooker of the audience and object of the audience's gaze ("You think about yourself as another looking at you. You are yourself and also the one in

the mirror.”). This dual perspective is further extended to the double perspective in autobiographical recall, of a younger experiencing *I* as remembered by its later self.

The performance’s multimodality, combining movement, performed gesture, music, and dialogue, allows a rare view into what remains mostly hidden in a classical ballet performance: strenuous effort, rigorous discipline, the dancer’s emotions. In this piece, construing this experience as a fictive dialogue of antagonist forces before an audience allows for the autobiographic narrative to be told and demonstrated. Further, it prompts a triadic construction of participants and viewers, and perspective-taking by the latter. This leads to engagement with the piece and a response of cognitive and affective empathy towards the dancer and her story, which could well be that of any dancer.

Construing the physical experience of dance in conversational terms is extremely common (Pascual and Brandt 2015; Brandt 2015) and illustrates the frequent understanding of our inner and outer world as a communicative exchange. Indeed, the Conversation Frame is a powerful cognitive model for organising our thoughts and conceptualising reality (see overview in Pascual 2014, Pascual and Sandler 2016, Pascual and Oakley 2017). More specifically, our case study adds to the growing body of evidence suggesting that everyday face-to-face interaction serves as a model for cognition (Brandt 2015), language use (P.Aa. Brandt 2004; Oakley 2009; Kövecses 2015), and even grammar, as in the obligatory use of fictive direct speech for the expression of thoughts and emotions (de Vries 1990; van der Voort 2016), evidential markers (Jarque and Pascual 2015; Spronck 2016) or the future tense (van der Voort 2016) in some languages. Thus, our intense experience with intersubjectivity frames our cognition and language in a similar manner as our life-long experience with our bodies and the physical world does (cf. Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 1999; Sweetser 1990). The socio-communicative experience of conversation can be construed and spoken about as physical movement, just as much as the purely physical experience of dance can be construed and spoken about as a socio-communicative experience like conversation.

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¹ All quotes from the original Portuguese script were translated into English. Stage directions –in italics and between square brackets– were added, after visualisation of the video. Underlining is used to highlight parts in examples we wish to direct readers’ attention to.

² Giving fictive voice to a body or body part is not restricted to art or creative discourse, but also occurs in ordinary language use (Clark and Gerrig 1990, 794). The conceptualisation of the human body as a conversational partner as a means of expressing its physical state may also become conventionalised, as in these common expressions in Catalan (Pascual and Oakley 2017, 349):

- (i) *El cos diu prou.*
Lit. ‘The/My/Your body says ‘stop’.’
‘X [the owner of the ‘speaking’ body] is exhausted.’
- (ii) *córrer/marxar comes ajudeu-me*
Lit. ‘to run/leave legs, help me’
‘to run away very quickly and desperately’

³ This interaction is reminiscent of the debate with Kant, a didactic fictive exchange between a contemporary philosophy professor and the long-deceased Kant, for the benefit of students (Fauconnier and Turner 2002; Brandt 2008).