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Kleist's Puppet Theatre and the Art of Tango

Looking for the Back Door to Paradise

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ABSTRACT: This edited transcript of a presentation by filmmaker/choreographer Laura Taler responds to Heinrich von Kleist's text by taking him on as a dancing partner. It follows a simple structure of proposal and response similar to that found in the movements between leader and follower in Argentine tango. Engaging Kleist's text in the double form of a speech and a tango performance, this critical contribution follows a twofold direction: it questions Kleist's representation of dance as a mechanical activity deprived of any form of intelligence and it refuses his attempt to force the aesthetic experience of dance into a framework that privileges theory over bodily experience. These two classical philosophical positions are questioned and provocatively opposed to the dynamic, situated, and dialogic thought performed within a witty tango interaction.

KLEIST'S PUPPET THEATRE AND THE ART OF TANGO

Looking for the Back Door to Paradise*

Laura Taler

While passing the winter of 1801 in the town of M— I chanced one evening, in the public garden, to meet Mr. C., who had lately been appointed chief dancer at the Opera in that town, and was enjoying uncommon success with his audiences.

I said how surprised I had been to notice him more than once at a puppet theater which had been hammered together in the marketplace, to entertain the crowds with little mock heroic dramas, interspersed with songs and dances.

He assured me that the pantomime of these puppets gave him much pleasure, and suggested in no uncertain terms that any dancer who wished to improve his art might learn all sorts of things from them.

Since the remark, and his tone of voice, implied something more than a passing fancy, I sat down with him, the better to hear the grounds on which he would support so strange an assertion ...

Heinrich v. Kleist, *On the Puppet Theatre*

What does Kleist's *On the Puppet Theatre* (1811)¹ have to do with the art of tango?

My initial answer to that question is that both puppet theatre and tango are partner dances. I would even propose that all the elements Kleist brings together in his short story are dances of sorts involving a partner.

The first example of a partner dance in Kleist's story is between the puppet and the puppet master. Second, I would propose that the young man dances, however self-consciously, with his reflected image.

* This paper is an edited transcript of a lecture/demonstration I gave on 19 November 2008 during an ICI workshop on Heinrich von Kleist.

1 For this talk, I used the translation and edition by Philip B. Miller in *An Abyss Deep Enough: Letters of Heinrich von Kleist, with a Selection of Essays and Anecdotes* (New York: Dutton, 1982), pp. 211-16. All citations to the short texts are given from this source without page numbers.

The third dance takes place between Mr. C and the bear, between a cultured civilized man and a wild primordial beast. There is even a dance between the narrator of the story and Mr. C. And further, between Kleist and the reader.

Argentine tango is a partner dance involving a leader and a follower. From my experience, most people believe that the follower is relatively passive, simply following the steps of the leader. I can assure you, however, that the follower in Argentine tango is anything but passive. The way I like to describe the roles between the leader and the follower is that the leader proposes and the follower responds, resulting in a dialogue of movement: a conversation which can be sweet and pleasant, heated and confrontational, and everything in between.

In my discussion of Kleist's *Puppet Theatre* I will follow a structure of proposal and response. I will highlight some elements of what Kleist proposes in his text and I will articulate my response to these elements coming from my background as a dancer and choreographer, and in particular from my background as a dancer of Argentine tango.

I have chosen to structure my response in five steps – but I warn you ahead of time that some of these steps are in fact short combinations made of various components. You will encounter some unfamiliar tango terms, which I will describe briefly, and there will even be a couple of short demonstrations.

A tango dance begins long before the music starts. First you have to find a partner. In Buenos Aires you scan the room, make eye contact with someone, and subtly, or not so subtly, nod your head. If the other person nods back, you meet on the dance floor. This can be an exhilarating but also harrowing experience.

Fortunately, my dance with Kleist was a blind date of sorts, set up by Christoph Holzhey and Manuele Gagnolati, respectively Director and Special Advisor to the Director at the ICI Berlin. I was a bit put off when they proposed that I dance with a dead man, but I'm a sucker for German Romanticism. Besides, a dance is a dance. And since my matchmakers also happen to be our hosts in this fabulous dance palace, how could I refuse?

My first impression, as I look at the text, is that it is handsome and appealing. It has an old world gallantry and at the same time implies a sense of play. There is the dancer mysteriously referred to

as Mr. C, the friendly and outgoing narrator, and a proposal comparing dance and the puppet theatre in such a wholehearted tone that it makes my eyebrows go up in anticipation. Already I feel somewhat of a challenge coming. But I have been well trained, so I begin the dance, giving my partner my full attention, open and generous to what he will propose.

FIRST STEP: THE CENTRE OF GRAVITY

The first thing I feel the need to respond to is the following quote: ‘Each movement [...] had its centre of gravity: it would suffice to control that centre, on the inside of the figure; the limbs, which are really nothing but pendulums, follow of themselves, in a mechanical way, without further aid’. I want to stress that he is not saying that the puppet master must control the centre of the puppet, but the centre of gravity of each movement. So what does that mean?

DEMONSTRATION: CENTRE OF GRAVITY OF A MOVEMENT

EXAMPLE 1: HIGH LIFT

The centre of gravity of a high lift should be in the upper part of the sternum. Unfortunately, some performers of the high lift place the centre of gravity in the back, between the shoulder blades, turning this elegant movement into a crass backbend.

EXAMPLE 2: TANGO LEAD – SIMPLE WALK²

The centre of gravity of the leader’s walk, in other words, where the lead comes from, is not as some might think in the arms or in the feet of the leader but inside the torso. More technically it could be said that the lead comes from creating an intentional connection between the perineal muscle and the diaphragm, then projecting this connection forward in space. The movement begins when the torso moves forward, the feet follow after the torso has initiated the movement, and the arms act as a frame. The centre of gravity of the leader’s tango walk can therefore be said to be inside the torso. The feet then are ‘nothing but pendulums’, as Kleist writes, and ‘follow of themselves, in a mechanical way, without further aid’.

2 Walking is never simple.

As these examples demonstrate, I agree with Kleist's proposal. I do, however, have some resistance here with regard to his use of the word 'mechanical'. I would use 'organic' rather than 'mechanical'. I would say 'organic' is more desirable in a dancer since 'mechanical' implies no variation. The result is that the dance will be exactly the same every time. One of the things that makes dance compelling is the theme and variation of movements from one dancer to another, and from one dance to the other with the same dancer.

Moreover, the organic nature of a dancer often leads to mutations or mistakes in the exactness of a step. But mistakes can suggest new steps and new combinations. There is nothing like making a 'mistake' in the given order of things and recognizing that your mistake has revealed something new. Isn't this how all discoveries are made? In theory, a machine does not make mistakes but is the same every time.

Kleist's first step is a simple one and I follow him. But he is a forceful leader and I find that even at the beginning of our dance I must assert myself and respond with an equal force. I realize that I will have to stay very alert when dancing with this partner.

STEP TWO: EASY AND DIFFICULT STEPS

Kleist's next proposal is that although something may seem simple and easy, it requires a mysterious sensitivity. He takes a number of small simple dance steps, carefully responding to the music, but then quickly changes direction – he shifts the axis of dance onto me and proceeds to turn around me.

DEMONSTRATION: AXIS (RELATED TO THE CENTRE OF GRAVITY OF A MOVEMENT)

The axis is a vertical line around which one's balance is maintained.³ Think of walking forward. When you are standing, balanced on both feet, your axis runs vertically through your body. As soon as you change your weight to one foot, to take a step, your axis shifts over that foot. You then lift the foot without the axis and as you move it forward, you intentionally displace your axis forward, allowing yourself to be off bal-

3 This brief definition of axis is from *Tango Dance Concepts* <<http://www.tango-concepts.com/terms.html>> [accessed 19 April 2010].

ance for a split-second, until you catch your balance as you put your foot down. You are once again on your axis.⁴

In Argentine tango, the axis is sometimes shared between the two dancers, making balance a joint effort that requires a constantly evolving degree of pressure and release. Sometimes the axis is shifted onto one partner, allowing the other partner a swinging motion as s/he moves around the axis, essentially moving around the partner who is 'holding' the axis.

Imagine a compass with one leg firmly on the paper and the other leg swinging around, drawing a circle. Imagine the stationary leg of the compass as the partner holding the axis and the moving leg of the compass as the dancer doing the fancy footwork, relying on their partner to 'hold down the fort', as it were. Now imagine moving the fort.

I ask you to imagine 'moving the fort' because a good amount of effort is required when the axis between two bodies is shifted. The axis is analogous to the centre of gravity of a movement. It is the grounding point of a movement around which everything else can move. Moving around the axis is one thing, but moving the axis to a new place can result in a sizeable shift of perspective.

And this is usually where the fun begins.

First, Kleist writes that something easy and simple requires sensitivity – these are his small steps. But then he quickly shifts the axis of dance:

[...] considered from another point of view, [the centre of gravity] is something very mysterious. For it is nothing less than the path of the dancer's soul, and he doubted whether it could be found except by the puppeteer transposing himself into the center of gravity of the marionette; or, in other words, by dancing.

A mysterious process indeed, for how does one transpose oneself into the path of another's soul? Perhaps one must consider that dancing is less about movement and more about how movement leads one to experience moments of stillness. My dancing partner makes his point by pausing.

4 Using the simple act of walking as an analogy for the idea of tension as a dynamic equilibrium, an equilibrium that is dynamic because it is achieved by a constant balance/imbalance, was often discussed and argued over during our colloquia at the ICI Berlin as we tried to come to mutual understandings of tension.

One of the hardest things to do is to pause while dancing: hard because once you are moving you have to stop the momentum, hard because it means not blindly following the rhythm of the dance, but listening to the music and to your partner with a considerable amount of sensitivity. But mostly it's hard because it's not easy to be suspended in a moment with someone. How often do you stand still, embraced in someone's arms? And for how long?

Kleist and I are having fun now, the aggression of the first steps have shifted into contemplative listening. All we are doing is holding each other and breathing, suspended in the profundity of an embrace. It is like a deep pause in a conversation, where the interlocutors look into each other's eyes simultaneously. It is not an accident that some say that the eyes are the windows to the soul.

STEP THREE: DON'T THINK! JUST DANCE; OR THE THINKING BODY VERSUS THE THINKING MIND

Kleist is feeling provocative. He comes out of the pause with a quick *ocho* (a half turn that changes direction), then a surprisingly aggressive *sacada*, where he steps into my space (this is basically a step where he displaces my leg, moving it out of the way), and finally a *gancho* (literally translated 'a hook').

In the text I see the words 'mindless', 'mechanical', 'turning the crank'!

Of course precision in dance is desirable, but not a mechanical precision. As I said before, it is the slight variations and even the mistakes that arise when striving for precision that give each dance the possibility of transcendence.

He's just showing off now: Look what I can do!

He wants to build the perfect puppet dancer!! – to his specifications, of course. To remove chance and to build perfection through crafting a marionette whereby only a crank would have to be turned to operate her.

He talks about removing 'this last fraction of mind': A thinking dancer is a bad dancer – don't think, just do the steps. To do this Kleist wants to remove the puppeteer: '[...] even this last fraction of mind [...] could indeed be removed from the marionettes, their dance transposed wholly into the realm of mechanical forces and [...] produced by means of a crank'. But if there is no puppeteer, then who would be left to turn the crank?

He means well, I think? He is so enthusiastic, like a boy in a toy store. He has clearly been formulating his fantasy of a mechanical dancer for a long time, and his goal is somewhat admirable. '[A] lightness, a serenity, and a gracefulness that must amaze every thinking person'. Naturally, lightness, serenity and gracefulness are the qualities most admired. It is an appropriate combination of properties. I especially like serenity – yet another thing that people don't think of when they think about tango. People think about aggression, passion, sensuality, but not serenity. And yet, it is the sweetness and serenity, the intimacy of connection that a tango dance can bring out that I find most appealing.

So I am following Kleist easily here – even more so because he precedes this sentence by pointing to the fact that the dance, the movements, the steps, do not have to be complex or fancy, which I agree with: '[Those] unfortunate people [... with ...] mechanical legs that English craftsmen manufacture for hapless accident victims' – their range of movement is limited and they move beautifully. But I baulk at how he pits the lightness, serenity, and gracefulness of the dancer against 'every thinking person'.

He leads a *sandwichito*, then opens up for me to step through, but he does not give me the freedom to play. He leads the step so that I have no room to develop the dance with him.

DEMONSTRATION: SANDWICHITO

A *sandwichito* is a step where 'one partner's foot is sandwiched between the other partner's feet'.⁵ This can be a playful move because it is literally a small foot sandwich, but also because, just after the *sandwichito*, the leader can allow the follower all the time in the world to play. As the leader opens up one part of the sandwich, let's say the top part of the 'bread', the follower can do a myriad of things with the free leg, including marking the music with little taps on the floor, or rubbing the foot up and down the leg of the leader. But some leaders have no consideration for the creativity of their partners and move through the *sandwichito* directly to the next step without leaving any room for play.

I think I need to take a step back, let me read that sentence again: 'The range of their movements is of course limited; but within it they

5 *Tango Dance Concepts* <<http://www.tangoconcepts.com/terms.html>> [accessed 19 April 2010].

attain to a lightness, a serenity, and a gracefulness that must amaze every thinking person.’ Something is funny here, but I am not given time to really process it. Perhaps I am a little sensitive, but to ‘amaze every thinking person’? Don’t all people think? Wouldn’t that imply that there are non-thinking people? Dancers perhaps? Of course he is talking about wooden limbs and puppets so I should not be insulted. But is he?

Well, there is no time to consider this move right now because we are about to make a change in direction and if I do not move quickly I am going to get stepped on. I feel like I am being pushed around right now, too many steps, too much fancy footwork, he’s making me dance his steps, but he is not letting me dance with him.

STEP FOUR: MOVING FROM THE INSIDE OUT

And now it seems that we move towards the crux of the matter. The steps maintain their speed but his lead is more intense. It is not just showing off: the movement is coming from somewhere deeper, a strong conviction. I feel my body respond by rooting into the ground and projecting this rootedness towards my partner.

Affectation! – A great theme in dance. (I have complained about it often enough.) But how does one’s soul settle in one’s elbow? According to Kleist, the fantasy of the mechanical dancer is ‘a more natural coordination of the centre of gravity’, ‘incapable of affectation’. He writes: ‘affectation [...] appears when the soul (the moving force) is located at any point other than the centre of gravity of a movement’.

Let us now return to the issue of the centre of gravity of a movement. This is the point from which you lead a move; all other parts should follow without effort or affect. Kleist gives the example of dancer F, in the role of Paris, offering the apple to Venus: ‘his soul (in a manner fearful to behold!) actually settles in his elbow’.

DEMONSTRATION: PARIS’ SOUL SETTLES IN HIS ELBOW

This is a hard one to describe because performing where one’s soul has settled is a fine and delicate matter, but I regard it as having everything to do with intention. When dancer F performs the gesture whereby Paris presents the golden apple to Aphrodite, it seems he has chosen to present his own beauty rather than a key plot point in the story. The line of his forearm and the long sinewy bicep that is apparent in his sleeveless smock join at his elbow. F chooses to place his soul, his centre

of gravity, his axis even, in his elbow. Everything revolves around the beauty of the body that surrounds his elbow, making the movement and the message affected. I would guess that the centre of gravity of this movement should be the giving of the apple to Aphrodite. In this case, Paris might be slightly off-balance. His axis, his centre of gravity, his soul, is moving forward towards Aphrodite, awaiting for her to reward him by pushing Helen against him.

Finally Kleist shares with me where all this has been leading:

Such blunders [...] are unavoidable, since we have eaten of the tree of knowledge. But Paradise is locked and bolted and the Cherub is behind us. We must make a journey around the world, to see if a back door has perhaps been left open.

So? There is a back door to paradise? And maybe it is open? Or is it the journey 'we must make' that is important? The narrator has barely enough time to smile and even less time to think that 'the intellect cannot err where none is present'. This is the second time Kleist brings up the incongruity of thinking and the dancer – I feel the need to speak up for my fellow *terpsichoreans*.⁶

Although Kleist is correct when he proposes that the mind can distract the body, part of our job as dancers is to train the brain and the body to work together. We train the body to develop an awareness of itself that can be called upon instantly – one could say that we train the brain to think using words and the body to think by using the tension and release of muscles – this is referred to as muscle memory.

It is true that the mind cannot interfere in the body of a puppet like it does in the body of a human, and this is why dancers, and even musicians and athletes, must continually practice their craft. But this practice is not about getting rid of the mind, it is about connecting the mind and body so that they can work together seamlessly – another partner dance perhaps.

As an aside I would like to mention that the Western history of thought has tended to separate mind and body. I could say that this separation is a bit old-fashioned and that it has been variously contested, but unfortunately it is still used all around us and I do not think

6 *Terpsichorean* (plural *terpsichoreans*): 'From *Terpsichore*, the Muse of dance in Greek mythology. [...] A person who dances, especially professionally' (*Wiktionary* <<http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/terpsichorean>> [accessed 19 April 2010]).

we have yet been able to shift the way we look at ourselves sufficiently to stop this knee-jerk polarity.

STEP FIVE: OUT OF THIS WORLD/OFF OF THIS WORLD

Kleist goes on to discuss the advantages that a puppet has through counter-gravity. He sees gravity as an obstructive force that impedes the dance. But gravity is one of our partners in the dance, it is one of the forces we work with. The ground is our base and allows us to create a whole range of physical qualities from light and soft to heavy and aggressive. In tango (as well as many other dances) we talk about three partners: the dancer in front of us, the music, and the ground or gravity.

Like the narrator, I cannot agree that a mechanical doll could have more charm than the human body, with all of its contradictions. But Kleist is a skilled dancer, giving me the narrator's voice to articulate some of my thoughts and feelings. And as he slowly brings the narrator in to collaborate on this project of his, he brings me in too.

Suddenly, in the middle of our dance Kleist amazes me with a perfectly executed one hundred and eighty degree turn, stating that only a god could compete with a puppet. Then he challenges my knowledge of the most established narrative of creation.

To prove my understanding of how a certain type of consciousness can disrupt the dance, I start glancing at myself in the mirrors around us. I lengthen my steps, dissatisfied with the line my more natural gait is producing. This throws off our rhythm slightly but he responds to my consciously self-conscious gait with a primal display of virtuosity. And I am finally won over.

Perhaps, as Kleist suggests, we are like two intersecting lines that have re-emerged towards the end of the tango with either no consciousness at all or an infinite one, full of knowledge of the other or lost in the oblivion of the dance: either way, in some element of bliss. Perhaps tango is the closest we will come to tasting the apple. But the dance is over, so we go back to our seats.

If the dance ends and we are left on the floor a god and a puppet, then who is the god and who is the puppet? Perhaps in our dance, Kleist thinks of himself as the god and believes me, his reader, to be his puppet. Perhaps.

Perhaps I will end by saying that both puppets and gods are creations of man.

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