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Module: Dance in context

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This essay will include a critical analysis of the following contemporary dance pieces:

Tundra, *NDC Wales* and *Artificial Things*, *Stopgap Dance Company*. An understanding of the historical, political and social contexts in which both of these pieces were created will be evident throughout the review. An exploration of the similarities and differences between both dances will be presented throughout this piece of writing, including description and analysis of movement language, setting, staging and design, as well as other artistic choices made by the choreographer.

Stopgap Dance company is a UK based contemporary group that perform their original works nationally and internationally, they are also a resident company of Farnham Maltings (an arts centre in Farnham, England). What makes Stopgap differ from most other mainstream dance companies is that it is inclusive to all as it employs disabled and non-disabled dancers, therefore, the choreographer-led pieces often show unique and innovative ways of collaborating between people with a range of different disabilities, often resulting in a clear sense of unity and community between a wide variety of different people through the medium of dance. According to the official Stopgap website the company “values a pioneering spirit and are committed to making discoveries about integrating disabled and non-disabled people through dance.”

Artificial things (first performed 5th February 2014) was choreographed by the company's resident choreographer and current Artistic Director Lucy Bennett. Bennett has been a part of Stopgap's work since 2003, during this time it is clear that she has effectively created a method to combine and intertwine the abilities of both disabled and non-disabled dancers to produce meaningful pieces that reflect the aim of the company. This piece was performed by five dancers (three male, two female) three of which are disabled dancers with two of them not having use of their legs and one having Down syndrome. The stimulus for the overall piece, as told by Bennett during an interview with Disability Arts Online, was an imagined picture of a snow covered landscape with an isolated figure sitting on top of a collapsed wheelchair, the figure is being observed from afar as if through a snow globe. Bennett when creating this piece was also highly inspired by paintings from the artist Goran Djurovic which are widely renowned for their mysteriousness. Both these stimulus' are demonstrated throughout the piece in a range of different aspects such as costumes, movements, setting and music, these will be explained in further detail throughout the essay. Bennett uses a collaborative approach when choreographing; giving the dancers an active role in the process by providing choreographic tasks that result in a considerable amount of moment within the piece. This leads into another stimulus used by Bennett- personal experiences of the dancers, this is presented throughout the piece through movement that emphasises the individual's struggles. Bennett's intention for the piece includes three main aspects: coming to terms with life's limitations, constriction (the snow globe) and the individual's regrets.

National Dance Company Wales (NDCW) is a contemporary dance company that is known for their unique and imaginative ways of expressing meaning through movements, in often unthought of and abstract ways. According to the company themselves; "Because we believe in the power of dance, we share our passion for the artform. We create new possibilities of what dance can be so that more people can make, watch, participate in and

learn about dance in Wales and across the world. (NDCWales, 2020).” NDCW aim to provide dance to a vast audience resulting in them performing in all types of places from town halls, to international stages. They are a repertory company that have created work with world renowned choreographers resulting in a wide range of different styles and stimulus’, however each piece often revolves strongly around a theme that is present throughout.

Tundra was choreographed by Marcos Morau, it proved to be a very successful piece as it was a Nominee at the UK Theatre Awards 2018 for Best Achievement in Dance. The word ‘Tundra’ itself is defined (according to the dictionary) as ‘a vast, flat, treeless Arctic region of Europe in which subsoil is permanently frozen.’ Morau wanted this isolated, empty land to have a new lease of life brought to reality by ‘ultra-modern creativity (NDCWales, 2020)’ which is clear throughout the piece through movements and costumes. A second stimulus used by Morau is inspiration from Russian folk dance, the USSR and revolution, this is clearly represented through costumes and unison which will be further expanded upon throughout the essay. Morau’s aim for the piece according to NDC Wales official website is to take old ideas and create a renewed meaning using the style of contemporary. The piece has an almost futuristic feeling to it which is suggested by the soundscapes and costumes used throughout the piece. It is also stated on the website that Morau creates his bold style from using art and cinema as an inspiration, which is evident in this piece particularly with the almost unreal feeling of the movements, this suggests the staged fakeness of cinema as well as the bright costumes, which in themselves could be counted as a piece of art.

Artificial things is set in an empty abandoned shopping centre, this being the first thing to be seen when the piece begins. This embodies the stimulus of the isolated figure on the snow covered landscape from the first second of the performance, even before any movement has

occurred. The idea of isolation within the setting is further suggested by a counter that has two chairs while there is only one dancer in the space, therefore making the space seem even more empty than it is. The cold shades of beige and dull whites that cover every inch of the shopping centre creates an unwelcoming and undesirable atmosphere for the audience reflecting that of the snowy isolated imagine. The idea of isolation is further explored with the juxtaposition of the usual connotations of a shopping centre; bustling, loud and filled with bright coloured new objects, while in this reality it is completely empty and desolate, which raises the question of why anybody would want to be there. A connection to the title could be made as this setting is man made therefore artificial, however it is no longer suitable for its purpose making it appear useless and forgotten, perhaps a hint to the personal struggles that some of the dancers have experienced.

This sense of emptiness is also present in the setting of *Tundra*. With the desire to create an atmosphere of vast, barren land, the stage has no props or set on it, it is simply plain and empty, giving the audience a feeling of unfamiliarity and a sense of unease due to the unnatural landscape. The piece starts with a woman slowly turning under a red spotlight, red having connotations of war and danger, this further supported by the woman wearing a faceless mask making her appear eerie and lack individuality perhaps a direct correlation to the stimulus of the USSR, such as a lack of freedom of speech due to communism. This theme is also continued through the use of light, the main source of light is a rectangle of LEDs that surrounds the dancers as it rises from the floor to be suspended above them, with it being a rectangle it gives the appearance of confinement as the dancers stay within the light it provides. As it passes above them it almost gives the impression of a creation of invisible walls as the dancers do not leave the space of the light therefore relating back to the stimulus of being trapped and almost controlled as they are not free to leave the

provided space. The vocals of a woman speaking Russian is present as a reflection back to the stimulus.

Scene one of *Artificial things* begins with a solo, predominantly performed from behind a counter- this in itself reflecting the theme of being confined to a small area such as the snow globe, especially due to the majority of movements only occurring in the upper half of the body, emphasising restriction. It could justifiably be suggested that this section is an expression of the dancer's personal struggles that they have dealt with in life, particularly, the struggles and limitations caused by their disability. There is a clear theme of anger and stress carried out throughout this solo, supported by the dynamics and choice of movements such as a range of gestural movements that are often sharp, for instance, the wagging of a finger to suggest constant limitations and control put on him from other people. With Bennett making the choreographic choice to use gestural movements it creates a sense of familiarity for the audience, therefore making it more understandable and relatable. Repetition of motifs is continuous throughout this scene which suggests an ongoing struggle that is difficult to overcome, this is further supported with the use of breath to create a heaviness to the movements, movements such as throwing the arms towards the floor in almost a fit of rage or built up stress. The theme of anger and stress is continued with movements such as the dancer physically moving his head with his hands, which could show the effort needed to control the inner struggle that he experiences- almost as if he is trying to take control of the fight he endures with his own mind. Repetition of the dancer covering his face with his hands implies that he is trying to hide from the struggles and issues that he has to deal with regularly. These repeated movements appear again at the end of the piece; a reminder to the audience that these issues still occur and will be an ongoing experience in the future for the dancer.

The anger towards others is implied with the constant repetition of pointing paired with strong facial expressions, which often is directly at the camera, this is further emphasised when another dancer enters the room yet the first dancer forces them to leave by chasing them and shooing them away. This suggests that this dancers struggles have led them to be isolated, which seems to be a realisation that occurs throughout the dance as the constant pointing turns to themselves either physically or through the use of mirrors. A sequence of floorwork here such as rolling gives the impression that he is trying to escape the anger and tension that he feels towards himself. This section ends with the dancer shaking which leads to them collapsing onto the counter, the use of shaking here shows that the anger and stress that he was struggling with has taken control of the whole body until it can cope no longer.

Unlike the isolation of people displayed throughout *Artificial things*, *Tundra* creates a sense of oneness and unity due to the constant unison visible throughout the piece. The piece starts with the dancers travelling in a tight pack in traditional Russian skirts, these skirts not only represent the stimulus of Russian folk dance, but also hide the dancers feet as they travel in such a way that creates a sense of them floating, resulting in the piece feeling futuristic and unreal. The group travels around the space filling the stage with different formations of lines and huddles, this relates back to the stimulus of the USSR as it implies that the dancers know their exact boundaries as if they are accustomed to it. These unnatural forced formations perhaps suggest an opinion of communism. The use of travelling in line also hints back to the idea of Russian folk dance. The aural use of soundscapes mixes familiar sounds such as wind and wind chimes with futuristic sounds that suddenly build in tempo and volume that correlates with the dancers movements as during these times the dancers change from controlled, organised movements to hectic chaotic travelling with a lack of unity. This sudden change creates a sense of panic and danger that could be connected back to the stimulus of the USSR. This sense of unity and

lack of individuality is reflected in the costumes worn as they are all the same for male and female, although, there is an extreme juxtaposition between the vast, empty stage to the multiple coloured and patterned full body one pieces- the design choice of having a one piece also reflects the idea of unison. These costumes not only reflect Morau's inspiration from cinema and art but also creates an element of fakeness as if the dancers are putting on a front to hide the cold bare reality. These costumes highly differ from those used in *Artificial things* as the colour scheme within that piece is filled with dull oranges and grey greens, a sense of coldness is created within these colours which relates back to the snow covered landscape that inspired the piece. These dull colours also make the dancers blend in with the background and setting which implies a sense of almost forgottenness and emphasises the isolation as they are physically representative of the abandoned building.

The second scene of *Artificial things* has a strong focus on the personal struggles of the dancers as implied by two duets, one duet performed by both dancers who lack the use of their legs. The floor based duet revolves around a dismantled wheelchair, with the dancers movements being gentle and gestural with moments of connection such as touching of hands, however, these moments appear to be fearful as they only last a second and then retract sharply, suggesting that it is hard to break the isolation especially with struggles of disabilities. The lack of struggle for the non-disabled dancers is implied with the juxtaposition of the second duet to the first, it is a travel based dance where both dancers maintain contact throughout. The flowing almost upbeat movements emphasise the struggles and isolation of the first duet, however, both duets involve a lot of physical support from one another suggesting that no matter the situation, support is a necessity. All of the dancers take inspiration for movements from how the dancers wheelchair moves, for instance the last section is predominantly floor based with the dancers rolling and travelling across the floor by crawling or turning, the use of a wheelchair may be associated with limitations however

by Bennett using it as inspiration it turns the element of limitation into a source of power and importance. This unison between all of the dancers no matter their differences creates a sense of community and inclusiveness, especially during the last section when the music changes to an upbeat song where all of the dancers express a feeling of freedom and enjoyment, this is a clear representation of the choreographic intention of the dancers coming to terms with their limitations as they are now using them to their advantages and have accepted their struggles and adapted to them.

The entirety of *Tundra* has a theme of movements that create a sense of control and fear. For instance there is a motif of holding each other's heads which is repeated throughout the piece, this could be a representation of the lack of freedom for thoughts as not only are the dancers restricted physically but also mentally. There is a jolt like dynamic in their movements which suggests a sense of fear, further supported by the constant looking around. This feeling of the dancers being watched is evident with the use of light as there is a wall of light behind them that opens and closes as if it has an eyelid, when the light is closed it creates a direct correlation to the movements as the unison and connection breaks as the dancers break away from the line and start walking around the space more naturally. Throughout the piece there are sections where one dancer will break away from the rest of the group causing all of the other dancers to watch them until they join back with the group, this suggests an element of social pressure to conform. This pressure to conform is reflected in the music as a soundscape is used that sounds like a jewellery box which is usually associated with children, therefore making it appear that this enforced unison is put in place from a young age. An amazing section of this piece is the weaving of arms as all of the dancers appear connected and all as one. The piece ends with the dancers laying on the floor as it starts to snow- perhaps a representation of the harsh Russian winters.

To conclude I think that each piece successfully represented the theme and intentions created by the choreographer through all of the artistic choices used throughout the performances.

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