

Hidden Narratives:
Dancers' Conceptualisations of Noncharacter Roles in Leotard Ballets by George
Balanchine and William Forsythe

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Abstract

The study of dancers' relationships with their noncharacter solo roles in leotard ballets by George Balanchine and William Forsythe reveals a dynamic cluster of flexible and multifaceted conceptualisations. Performers' process includes a range of abstract images, nonfictional and docufictional ideas, metaphoric allusions and storyboarding constructions. Drawing upon Michael Kirby's concept of non-matrixed performing (1987), as well as on ideas from dance aesthetics, narratology, theatre and film theories, noncharacter roles are understood as partly flexible, diverse performing frameworks that contain ambiguity but do not promote characterisation. The findings suggest that the dissolution of character traits in plotless choreography often serves as a catalyst for the performers' polyvalent expressions of their artistic identities, value systems and agency. Observation of performances, in conjunction with the direct interviews with expert dancers from several international ballet companies, brings to light the links between the performer's ideas and the effects observable in the dance. Attention to the performers' approaches and aspects of the work which they wish to emphasise reveals less observed aspects of dance texts and illuminates the nature of the ballet dancer's qualitative contribution in non-narrative choreography.

Keywords: Dancer, Ballet, Noncharacter role, George Balanchine, William Forsythe, New York City Ballet, Frankfurt Ballet, The National Ballet of Canada, The Royal Ballet, Leotard ballet, Abstraction, Dancer's identity, Creative process, Dancer's agency, Non-narrative ballet, Dancer's interpretation, Docufiction.

I Introduction

Asked to reminisce about past performing, ballet dancer Frederic Franklin spoke with seeming bemusement about his earliest leading ‘noncharacter’ dance parts. Performed by Franklin as a principal dancer with the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo during the 1940s, George Balanchine's *Serenade* (1934) and *Danses concertantes* (1944) as suites of dances without indicated story lines featured leading performers as protagonists of the dance action, rather than as portrayers of dramatic characters in a story. Franklin's recollection indicates that this was an unusual task for a principal dancer at the time: prior to these ballets he had ‘never been on the stage as nothing’ – the dancers ‘were always something’ or at least had a metaphor, or ‘a theme’ as a reference with which to work. As Franklin pointed out, in these Balanchine's ballets, however, there was only the performer on the stage, or as he said, ‘... nothing, but me!’ (Franklin with Reynolds, in Reynolds and Brooks, 1997 [film]). The choreographer's reticence about the dances' meanings additionally deterred the performers from characterisation, and they had to find individual ways to relate to such roles. In Franklin's case, as he indicated further, the movement was ‘interesting’ and ‘so inventive’ that it provided a lead which ‘took the place of any kind of portrayal that one might have expected’ (1997 [film]).

Franklin's vivid story about his past performing experiences provides an overture to this article in which I explore the relationship of twentieth- and twenty-first-century ballet dancers with their noncharacter roles. Borne out of the decomposition of *fabulae*, or the linear, chronologically-based narrative content of ‘stories’ (after Culler 1981), leading noncharacter parts have been on the rise, particularly through the twentieth century, in the genre vernacularly known as abstract ballet. The modalities of performing in such choreography so

far have not been analysed in depth. Noncharacter, a borrowed term – used by Franklin's interviewer historian Nancy Reynolds – here serves as a starting point for an exploration into a particular performing framework. Similarly to many other terms, including abstraction, nonnarrativity or plotlessness, the noncharacter too is used implicitly in many dance discussions. It appears thus in Reynolds's interview with Franklin, as well as elsewhere in dance writing – Marcia Siegel, for instance, in her contemplation of Jerome Robbins's *Dances at a Gathering* (1979) applies to it a loose denotation of ‘noncharacter ballet’ (Siegel, 1979, 314).

As I hope to show later, noncharacter in dance may be understood as a term which captures a range of approaches, entities and ideas that do not amount to the character, or to characterisation, as a mode of expressive interpretation. Since ‘non-’ in ‘noncharacter’ directly positions the term in contrast to ‘character’, yet does not quite imply an ‘anti-’ stance, it contains an element of ambiguity which is useful to consider briefly. In narratological studies of literature, drama and film, *the character* is quite clearly defined – it is theorised as a construction of identifiable physiognomic and psychological characteristics of personhood that arise in narrative texts (in Margolin, 2007 and Fludernik, 2007, for instance). In his structural analysis of the levels of narrative, Roland Barthes speaks of a ‘psychological consistency’ (1977, 256) which is formed through the character's reactions to story events and situations, thus assisting in the construction of the narrative. As theorist Mieke Bal expands in her study of literary and dramatic narratology, characters are not real entities. Rather, they are effects – ‘character-effects’, constituted through the narrative: the story does not materialise without characters as carriers of the narrative action. As an agent of the story, the character in turn remains recognisable across the work and an effect of an individual real, or imaginary persona is achieved (Bal, 2009, 113).

For the character to materialise, therefore, certain conditions have to be met, and many are directly related to the fabula, or the story content in the narrative organisation of the text. That is a significant distinction for this article too: character/characterisation emerges under specific narrative conditions in dance as well. When such conditions are not met, we do not encounter the character, but rather may speak in terms of the noncharacter – a gradational, or dimensional term, used in varied contexts and without a firm definition in literary narratology, drama and film. The term *noncharacter* sometimes distinguishes the levels of action in the nonlinear emplotment in films which do not follow ‘character arc patterns common to mainstream feature film cinema’ (in Meachem, 2013: 629). Elsewhere, the term describes an ambiguous identity and agency of the narrator in particular literary works (Fludernik, 2007; Phelan, 2013), or in Hollywood films (Bordwell and Thompson, 2012). Although it would be interesting to analyse similar possible appearances across dance genres, a full theory of diverse dance noncharacters is beyond this article's scope. Nevertheless, this partly flexible concept helps facilitate the discussion of ballet roles which do not quite amount to characters, or characterisation.

This article's purpose is to look deeper into ballet performers' conceptualisations of such roles. I will argue that there is a more complex relationship between a dancer and the noncharacter than has been noticed thus far in dance studies. Whether the peak of ‘abstract’ choreographic explorations is behind us or not, such a consideration is of notable importance today: its timeliness lies in the vivid presence of plotless ballets in the current international repertoire. If it is agreed that the dancer has an important influence over the illumination of the dance text¹, then the performers’ conceptualisations of noncharacter roles may significantly impact

¹ Adina Armelagos and Mary Sirridge in polemic with Joseph Margolis (in Sheets-Johnstone, 1984) discuss the dynamic qualitative aspects of the dancer's style as distinctive from the style of the choreographer as well as the style of the choreographic work. More recently, Graham McFee (2011) acknowledges the dancer's distinctive contribution, but emphasises the instantiation of the choreographic text as the primary role, over the qualitative contribution of the performer.

dissemination, critical interpretation and understanding of such choreography. I will argue that noncharacter parts, if analysed through dancers' approaches, open many possibilities. They do not necessarily lead to the rejection or negation of 'character', although they never quite amount to it. Rather, the dissolution of character traits in choreography serves to many performers as a catalyst for the construction of fluid and multidirectional conceptualisations of their dancing parts. Noncharacter roles, in this repertoire, thus may be described as a constellation, a dynamic cluster of stimulating associations that support expression in performance. By looking at performers' ideas and aspects of the work which they wish to emphasise, we also find out more about the dance text, as well as about the position of the dancer as its contributor.

As a case study, I focus upon one particular lineage: late twentieth century practice-clothes leotard ballets. This sub-genre with a particularly spare aesthetic flourished on the stages of Western Europe and the United States of America from the mid-1940s and is still explored to date. As explained in more detail later, this genre is particularly interesting for the analysis of performers' conceptualisations because dancers seem to have very few references to stories, or allusions to dramatic characters, types or personalities. The main examples will be soloist roles from two choreographic repertoires, by George Balanchine (1904–1983) and William Forsythe (1949–). Due to their aesthetic links and differences, these choreographers' practice-clothes ballets, as a collection of celebrated works, offer interesting terrain for consideration. The works discussed, Balanchine's *The Four Temperaments* (created in 1946, but revised as a practice-clothes dance in 1951²), and 1957 *Agon*; Forsythe's *Steptext* (1985), *In the Middle*,

² There is a slight variation in the title: in 1946, the original *Four Temperaments* created for the Ballet Society was dressed in the ornately designed costumes by Kurt Seligmann; the stripped-down version from 1951 includes the article (*The Four Temperaments*).

Somewhat Elevated (1987) and *the second detail* (1991)³, span more than four decades, and are consistently present across the international repertoire and performed by many dancers. Although Balanchine and Forsythe may not have aimed to contribute to a particular sub-genre, these works are paradigmatic for the above aesthetic. Their emphasis is on the dance movement and structural aspects of choreography, rather than on the articulation of a story. In Balanchine's ballets in question the viewer's attention is focused on choreomusicological and compositional aspects (as explained in Jordan, 2000, 2002). The works are performed on a bare stage with a backdrop of a coloured cyclorama; dancers wear sparsely designed costumes which reference rehearsal dress. Dance writer Joan Acocella observed that the editing out of elaborate costuming and 'the stripped-down look that was said to constitute the abstraction of his work – no story, no acting, no set' is the choreographer's 'way of banishing pseudo-explanations' and 'focusing on the event itself' (Acocella, 1997, online). In Forsythe's ballets too, a kind of embodied movement research that develops during performance (for example, in the improvisational sections at the *Steptext* opening, or in the female lead solo in *In the Middle...*) may be read more clearly because the design is sleek and minimal, directing the viewer's focus toward the dancers' body actions. With the referential content downplayed, in both repertoires it may be, however, more difficult to recognise the nature of the performer's expression.

To understand dancers' interpretative approaches in these works, I conducted a series of interviews with expert artists who frequently perform (or have performed) protagonist noncharacter roles within different contexts and proximities to the choreographer. Several

³ All three are one-act works performed by repertory companies. Their versions in Frankfurt Ballet are full-evening works. *Steptext*, made for Aterballetto, includes dance material from his earlier Frankfurt Ballet's (FB) four-act *Artifact* (1984); one-act *In the Middle ...* created for the Paris Opera Ballet, subsequently in Frankfurt became a full-evening work *Impressing the Tzar* (1988). Originally created for the National Ballet of Canada, *the second detail* (whose title is not capitalised in the original NBOC or FB programme notes) in FB grew into a two-act *The Loss of Small Detail* (1991), a fully reformed version of an earlier 1987 work (this early version was used for some of the *Improvisation Technologies* material, as explained by Haffner, 2000).

interviewees are, or were, prominent soloists in the repertory companies, and others performed in the choreographers' respective resident troupes (New York City Ballet, hereafter NYCB and Frankfurt Ballet, further FB⁴). Several dancers worked quite closely with the choreographers in question, including Merrill Ashley, Maria Calegari, Bart Cook and the late Violette Verdy in the Balanchine company; among Forsythe's collaborators from Frankfurt Ballet are Dana Caspersen, Jodie Gates, Jill Johnson and Crystal Pite. Repertory-company performers include principal dancers and soloists Deborah Bull and Hayley Forskitt (The Royal Ballet, henceforth RB), while Zdenek Konvalina, Aleksandar Antonijevic, Martine Lamy, Xiao Nan Yu, and Geon Van der Wyst were interviewed about their performances with the National Ballet of Canada (hereafter NBOC). These direct interviews were conducted between 2008-2013 as part of a wider study of the dancer's agency in leotard ballet⁵. The dancers were asked about their conceptual ideas relating to the performance of the solo roles over time. Although important, any possible short-term changes in response to temporary experiences (various logistical factors or circumstances of inter- and intra-personal nature during individual performances⁶) were not in the primary focus. Broader conceptualisations of individual roles were more significant for this analysis, because in many cases those related to the dancers' accentuations of the dance material, separately observed in performance.

⁴ Since the focus is on the works performed by a range of companies and dancers, Forsythe's examples are from his Frankfurt Ballet (1984-2004) period, rather than from his subsequent The Forsythe Company (2005-2015).

⁵ An examination of dancers' qualitative contribution in choreography by Balanchine and Forsythe in my doctoral thesis (Tomic-Vajagic 2012) showed that the dancer's imprint in the leotard ballets is a complex set of culturally conditioned, embodied qualities and actions.

⁶A study of 'dancer as rhetor' by Cynthia Roses-Thema (2008) integrated methods from phenomenology, somatic studies and ethnographic fieldwork to understand the dancer's experience during individual performances. It revealed the importance of various external and internal short and long term stimuli that affect individual performing experiences, including pain/injuries, relation to the audience, or circumstances of daily personal life.

II The dancer and the noncharacter role

The question of the dancer's conceptualisation of a noncharacter role seems particularly intriguing if even nowadays some leading performers indirectly express ambivalence about them. For instance, Zdenek Konvalina, a former principal dancer with the NBOC and English National Ballet (ENB) is on record stating his affinity for the 'dramatic' roles because they 'say something' (The National Ballet of Canada, 2011, online). Similarly, Canadian prima ballerina Martine Lamy said that she particularly 'well remembers' the details of her dramatic roles⁷ because they involve a deeper 'emotional attachment to a story line': 'I just always loved having a real story, with real characters to build by dancing' (Lamy, interview 15 April, 2011). Other known and more radical examples include autobiographical reflections of the NYCB ballerina Gelsey Kirkland, who expressed a particular dislike for Balanchine's storyless ballets. Kirkland experienced Balanchine's style and her leading roles (for instance in *Concerto Barocco*, 1941) as mechanical and dehumanised, because to her they promoted the aestheticism of movement divorced from meaning (Kirkland 1986, 94). There are also contrasting examples. Suzanne Farrell, Balanchine's close collaborator, felt that 'becoming a character' did not necessarily allow her all other possibilities opened in the moment of performance. Rather than finding narratives in her plotless roles, Farrell's theme, in her words, was 'to find something new' each time (Farrell with Daniel, 1993, film). In her accounts Farrell stresses that her close attention in performance included an awareness of musical nuances, which could vary with each live event⁸.

It is not clear why some dancers may not feel a 'deep attachment' to their plotless dance roles, while others embrace them. Beyond personal affinities, several reasons are immediately

⁷ Lamy spoke about her roles of Tatiana in John Cranko's *Onegin* and Giselle in Peter Wright's version (after Petipa, Perrault and Coralli).

⁸ See Farrell's account in Tracy, 1983, 156, and David Daniel's 1978 text 'A Conversation with Suzanne Farrell', *Ballet Review*, Vol. 7(1): 1-15).

plausible. For one, Franklin's quote suggests that non-narrative performing was a novel and surprising task for an early twentieth-century dancer. While not necessarily an unusual concept for the leading performers in various dance forms (including many social and folk dances), in ballet lead noncharacter parts as possibly non-mimetic entities arguably belong to the relatively recent era. The perceived domination of the representational style in performance arises through the claims of continuity of narrative traditions in ballet history (in Carter, 1998, Cohen, 1983 [1953] and Foster, 1998, for instance⁹). This is a potentially specious idea, however. Ballet history integrates moments of ambivalence toward mimetic performing. Charting of a tangled territory of narrative ballet tradition also has to take into account some strong discontinuities, including dancers' complex relationships with the choreographic texts in early ballets (in Franko, 1993 and Nye, 2011¹⁰), certain shifts away from intellectualism and toward virtuosity after the French Revolution (Chapman, 1988, 372–373), and interests in ballet's aesthetic analogies with poetry and metaphor (propagated by Théophile Gautier and Stéphane Mallarmé) during 19th century Romanticism. Furthermore, ballet history is dotted with smaller non-narrative dancing parts within full evening works – for instance, plotless divertissements, integrated into many 19th century operas and ballets, would have exposed dancers to the idea of noncharacter performing. Nevertheless, in the leading roles the dancers still shaped their roles through thematic and character anchors. Such an approach continued into the twentieth century, as Franklin's surprise suggests above.

⁹ Curtis Carter suggests that ballet's narrative tradition stems from the seventeenth-century theories of Claude-François Ménéstrier who advocated an integration of Antique principles of dramatisation into ballet, offering stimulation to the mind, rather than 'just' pleasing the senses' (1998, 22). Selma Jeanne Cohen emphasised the continuity of mimesis in ballet as the art of 'imitation' (1983[1953]). Susan Leigh Foster in her study of dance narrativity underlined the dancing masters' historical need to become convincing dramatists, while the dancer's artistry was most admired when their storytelling was as sophisticated as the art of theatre actors (1998, 70).

¹⁰ Mark Franko's research on Baroque ballet includes insights about the dancer's 'self' and the ludic relationships with abstract themes and design elements in specific dance texts (Franko 1993, 79). Edward Nye's study of *ballet d'action* includes consideration of the dancer's complex relationship to the 'character' in 18th century dances.

As noticed by dance historian Geraldine Morris in her studies of Frederick Ashton's style (2000, 2012), many twentieth-century ballet performers (and I would add their spectators too¹¹) have learnt to contemplate artistic expression by embracing 'the idea of character interpretation', while not as many have considered expression as a response to the qualitative layers of the dance text (2000, 281). The matters here, again, are complex. From the above examples of Farrell and Kirkland in the Balanchine company, we may see that contrasting experiences may exist even within any one ballet company. Farrell, who embraced noncharacter performing, also was a vocal supporter of Balanchine's training methodologies (Farrell, 1990); Kirkland, as an opponent of the style, incidentally rejected Balanchine's daily classes as arduous and unhelpful (Kirkland, 1986).

The probable influence of conceptual and physical training is thus interesting, but again a very complex factor, particularly today when any one professional ballet company includes performers from heterogeneous dance school backgrounds. A variable exposure to the diverse strategies of refinement coaching exists prior to joining the company and in it¹². All these aspects stand within the institutional context of the dancer's daily work in a company as a system of social relationships and hierarchies. Such a kaleidoscopic backdrop behind any one dancer's work is further complicated by individual changes in the performing style, personal circumstances and interests across time. As noted by Armelagos and Sirridge (1984), the dancer's style is a dynamic, changeable process which is tightly woven with the dancer's habitus. The approach to any particular choreography remains dynamic and it may shift during various points in the career, as performers' accounts illustrate. Konvalina, for instance,

¹¹ Value of characterisation as a benchmark of the dancer's artistry, in contrast with technical prowess, still emerges in contemporary ballet criticism. For instance, Luke Jennings's recent review describes Steven McRae, in the protagonist role in MacMillan's *Romeo and Juliet* as 'a fine technician' but a 'lightweight' in expression (Jennings, *The Guardian*, 27th September 2015).

¹² For example, in the professional programme of Canada's National Ballet School, dancers learnt repertory of canonic variations in the final school year, as a way of smoother preparation for professional repertory company employment. This is not necessarily an experience of all dancers who join NBOC from other schools.

expressed that his interpretation of the ‘Melancholic’ solo from Balanchine’s *The Four Temperaments* developed over a longer period, and included several gradual changes: ‘as I’m older I have a different way of approaching and understanding’ the role – ‘I feel like now, several years later, it is more important for me to express the mood, rather than show the technique’ (Konvalina, interview, 23 October 2009).

The performer’s ‘interpretation’, mentioned in the discussion above is another complicated topic. It should be immediately clarified, therefore, that the term is used conditionally in this text. The accent on ballet dancers’ ideas and conceptual accounts of their noncharacter parts does not allow enough space for detailed analysis of dancers’ performance documents. This view aligns with Paul Thom’s theoretical analyses of music performances: the evidence of the performer’s interpretative action is ‘relative to the material that is being interpreted’ (2003, 126).¹³ When mentioned in the present text, the ‘performer’s interpretation’ rather relates to the conceptual aspects, in line with the point made by dance analysts Valerie Preston-Dunlop and Ana Sanchez-Colberg: the act of interpreting begins with the ‘construction of meaning’ from an individual’s perspective (2002, 17).

The causes behind dancers’ approaches to their noncharacter roles, as well as qualitative assessments of their performing contributions, therefore, require a separate study. This article turns toward that which can be established more readily: (a) by the twentieth century, at least some, thematic or character attributes guided many performers in leading ballet roles; (b) in contemporary ballet performance, many dancers still apply binary distinctions between their roles as types which require different conceptual approaches, and (c) in any role, the

¹³ Analytic philosopher Graham McFee goes even further to suggest that not all performances are ‘interpretations’. To McFee, the dancer’s primary contribution is to instantiate a dance work, or to help materialise ‘the dance into a form with which the rest of us can interact’. Although performers infuse dances with ‘craft mastery’ (a combination of physical properties, and technical expertise and style), the ‘distinctive performer’s interpretation’ appears only if this craft mastery is ‘sufficiently distinctive’ as to reveal ‘a new nuance to the role’ (McFee, 2011, 169).

possibility of interpretation begins from the negotiation of meaning, which is informed by a network of influences, including the individual performer's 'memory, experience, knowledge, expectations and culture' (Preston-Dunlop and Sanchez-Colberg, 2002, 17).

III The noncharacter: a shift toward the plurality of performing modes

The idea that dance roles may be conceptualised as binary types is implicitly reinforced in Carole Hamby's (1984) broad aesthetic analysis of the dancer's relationship with the choreographed text. A dancer in a narrative work, suggests Hamby, should consider the context of the unfolding story, which frames the performing action. To develop 'character parts' in such dances, the performer 'must see the phases of his or her dancing as meaningful within the context of characterisation and narration' (1984, 41). Hamby does not elaborate, but it is possible to think of historical examples that may support her thesis. For instance, in the role of the Chosen Maiden from Vaslav Nijinsky's *Le sacre du printemps* (1913), the dancer originally cast, Bronislava Nijinska, according to her published recollections¹⁴ observed that her part was largely concerned with movement in relation to Stravinsky's score, contextualised through the storyline and visual references: '[a]s I danced I imagined above me the dark clouds in the stormy sky, remembered from the painting by Roerich' (Nijinska, 1992, 450). Ultimately, Nijinska thought about herself as a character in the story, imagining 'the primitiveness of the tribal rites, where the Chosen Maiden must die to save the earth' (1981, 450). Another Ballets Russes soloist, Lydia Sokolova – the Chosen Maiden in the 1920 version by Léonide Massine, observed that she had to multitask intensively, including 'acting': 'I had not only to do my fearful movements ... but I had to keep thinking, acting and

¹⁴ This account from Nijinska's *Early Memoirs* is cited here with the awareness of certain authorship ambiguities addressed by Lynn Garafola (see 'Crafted by Many Hands', *Dance Research*, 2011).

counting all at once' (Sokolova and Buckle, 1960, 166). These accounts fall in line with Hamby's point that in character parts the performer 'needs to be imaginatively and critically aware of the dance in terms of narrative and dramatic aspects', but also has to be mindful of 'the formal structure of the dance design' (1984, 43). For these reasons, suggests Hamby, the dancer's work in narrative dances is compatible with the approaches of dramatic theatre actors (1984, 41).

All dance roles arguably require the performer's multitasking. Hamby, however, highlights a clear distinction between the above 'character parts' and the roles from 'abstract or specifically architectural' dances. The works from the latter category 'make demands on performers which are comparable to the demands of musical composition' on music performers (1984, 41). In such dances, suggests Hamby, a performer should shift the focus away from mimesis and the performing contribution should be expressed through qualitative inflections within the set movement material. Otherwise, '[i]f a dancer places too much emphasis on characterization, narration or dramatic effect, other important aspects of the dance may fail to be performed' (Hamby, 1984, 42).

While Hamby's brief discussion of dancing roles serves her broader argument related to the dancer's layered relationship with the dance, these specific observations are useful for this article. Hamby clearly emphasises significance of the dancer's conceptual focus that should shift to accommodate the demands of a particular role, because of the possible impact of performance over the dance text. Hamby's implied broad binary typology presents problems, however. Upon a closer look, any one type, such as the structurally-driven or 'abstract' dance, includes quite a range. Even a narrower sub-genre of practice-dress leotard ballets, discussed here, includes a collection of roles with various degrees of referentiality. Structurally oriented practice-dress ballets by Balanchine plausibly have different requirements from the more

thematically invested ballets, such as Glen Tetley's elegiac *Voluntaries* (1973) or Maurice Béjart's colourful and programmatic *The Ninth Symphony* (1964). Kenneth MacMillan's practice-dress *Song of the Earth* (1965) even features the indicatively titled role of 'Death' (ROH, online). While such roles still may be read as 'noncharacters', because of the dissolution of the story and the resulting lack of formed and consistent characterisation, they include more potential references. Philosopher Peter Goldie (2004) proposes the concept of 'personality traits', properties distinctive from the concept of the character, as they represent a 'vener', an 'oblique' and summative 'disposition' about someone's persona (2004, 13 and 29–32). Such oblique characteristics stand apart from deeper, and more individual 'character traits', which Goldie denotes as more complex (psychological, moral) 'reason-responsive dispositions' about a person (2004, 26).

The category of structural or 'abstract' dances, therefore, includes a myriad of nuances of referentiality. Rather than a monolithic type, they represent a collection of diverse performing demands and styles, some of which may include personality traits. Dana Caspersen, dancer and Forsythe's close collaborator for the past several decades, articulates her experience of nuanced possibilities in performance. They sometimes overlap, yet are phenomenally distinguishable in various roles:

I don't experience a phenomenon of a stage persona vs. an everyday persona. But the moment of performance is certainly a point of heightened concentration and awareness. There are pieces where I am really acting — behaving and experiencing in a way that I normally would not — and there are pieces where I am myself in extraordinary circumstances (like in *In the Middle...*, for example). But again ... in each of these instances I am myself, reacting to the nature of my environment. (Caspersen, email correspondence, 1 April 2011)

Caspersen's account of a plurality of performing experiences may be related to Michael Kirby's (1987) theory of the performing styles in the late 20th-century 'formalist theatre'. Kirby suggests that 'in almost all performances the degree of complexity varies somewhat

from moment to moment' (1987, 11). The 'degree to which the external symbolization is supported and reinforced (or contradicted) by the performer's behaviour' may determine different degrees of character identification in a role (Kirby, 1987 4). In his chapter 'Acting and Not-Acting', Kirby offers one core distinction: 'acting' is a narrower mode than 'performing'. To Kirby 'to act' means a specific thing – 'to feign, to simulate, to represent, to impersonate' (1987, 3). Performing, however, may include a broader variety of stage behaviour. To show the plurality of modes, Kirby diffuses the initial binary of acting/not-acting into 'an axis' of performing behaviours, which comprises five core modalities according to the 'degree' of 'representation, simulation, impersonation' (1987, 11). The axis includes three 'not-acting' modes ('non-matrixed performing', 'symbolic matrix', and 'received acting'), and two very broad 'acting' approaches ('simple' and 'complex' acting, various acting methods notwithstanding). While Kirby includes dance in his study, he discusses it quite broadly, not analysing specific genres and roles.¹⁵ His framework is very useful for this study, however: similarly to Caspersen's example, Kirby's axis helps us to escape a binary, supports flexibility and the observation of nuances, since his five modes are not necessarily isolated and may overlap (1987,11).

His 'not-acting' side of the scale, with three modes, is of particular interest here. In the first, non-matrixed mode, a performer appears as an agent who carries out the actions, but does not aim to 'feign or impersonate' (1987, 3). Two other not-acting modes, 'symbolic' and 'received' acting, also feature performers not feigning/impersonating, yet a characterisation potentially emerges as a residual effect of the aesthetic features of the work. For instance, the 'symbolic acting' mode might arise through the 'costume continuum' which binds the performer to time/place context, and as a result, reinforces a 'symbolic' representation (1987,

¹⁵ His dance example mostly include postmodern dances by Laura Dean and Steve Paxton, but they exclude ballet, for example.

4). In ballet, this ‘symbolic’ mode might remind us of classical divertissements (a ‘jester’, a ‘fairy’), or full neo-romantic works such as Fokine's plotless *Les Sylphides*, or Robbins's *Dances at a Gathering*, which imply a situation depicted in a particular time/place. Kirby's third not-acting mode, ‘received acting’, describes the development of roles whose direction is very detailed – by simply embodying it, a performer produces an effect of ‘acting’, whether the characterisation is attempted or not (Kirby, 1987, 4). Kirby's received acting may be recognised in dancers' descriptions of particular solos, for instance, Fokine's *The Dying Swan*. Alicia Markova describes her work in the choreography which was specified to the finest details: in tandem with costuming, a dancer simply embodying the minutiae of the choreographic direction would achieve characterisation (Markova, 1986, 98).

Out of these three not-acting approaches, for this study Kirby's ‘non-matrixed performing’, the first mode, is the most interesting. Kirby's exemplification of this modality includes a range of ‘formalist’ theatre forms, from specific noncharacter parts in Japanese Noh, to the performing style in postmodern ‘Happenings’. Their common denominator is that the performers tend to “‘be” nobody or nothing other than themselves’ (1987, 3). The performers work without visible references and do not ‘represent, or pretend to be in a time or place different from that of the spectator’ (1987, 3). Although spectators may project their own interpretations onto people seen on the stage, selected ballets by Balanchine and Forsythe also feature dancers as agents of performance, who carry out the choreography without simulating or impersonating others, or pretending to exist in another time. The human figure, or rather the dancer as a person, is clearly presented, but the contextual referents are reduced to accentuate a particular choreographic point. The context left to be read is that the ballet dancer is a culturally-specific figure, a member of the contemporary Western theatre dance world, seen in the moments of work on stage (Tomic-Vajagic 2014b). Even when there are spare

design details as elliptical references – as in Forsythe's ballets (a sole abstract painting in the background of *Steptext*, the row of chairs and the square board with an inscription 'THE' in *the second detail*, or a single pair of golden cherries hanging above the dancers *In the Middle...*), they do not help to construct a narrative or lead to characterisation¹⁶.

Jill Johnson was a dancer in the original NBOC and FB versions and now is a frequent stager for *the second detail*. She suggests that dancers in the ballet 'don't have stage personas and their entrances and exits aren't formalised; they walk simply in and out of scenes':

As there is no narrative, it is important to look for the themes — the thematic choreographic passages, and to notice how the choreography relates to musicality. (Johnson, 2008, online).

As noted by Forsythe himself, Balanchine's influence on his choreography was considerable, especially in the works from the particular period, between *Artifact* (1984) and the mid-1990s works (Forsythe in Tusa 1999). Theatre theorist Hans Thies Lehmann, who includes Forsythe's works in the 'postdramatic theatre' paradigm, highlights Kirby's mode of non-matrixed performing as a feature of the genre in which many works call for an alternative from mimetic performing (2006, 135). Lehmann's point may remind us of Caspersen's reflection on the 'heightened' performing states that are distinctive, yet related to the dancer's 'everyday' self (p. 14). Caspersen also sees intricate juxtapositions between her different noncharacter roles in Forsythe works, which overall require a non-matrixed performing approach:

When I think about *the second detail*, I am very aware of my relationship to the floor as a kind of percussiveness. This is opposed to *In the Middle, ...*, where, even when it is fast, there is a feeling of a longer swing, where the arc of the motion you are involved in might, for example, swing below you into the floor. So, in *the second detail*, the feet are very percussive and explosive, there are more tight, angular constructions in the body to

¹⁶ One possible exception, found in a particular solo role in *the second detail*, of the 'White [Issey Miyake] dress/ Kate [Strong] solo' which may be read as an example of symbolic acting, is not analysed in this text.

negotiate. It is more like running down the complex slope of a mountain than flying through a mountain range (Caspersen, email correspondence, 14 March 2011).

Caspersen's nuanced articulation of her two noncharacter roles offers us images and concepts which overlap with structural aspects of the works. Her points lead to a closer examination of various distinctive conceptual interpretative possibilities that other dancers find in noncharacter roles in the Forsythe and Balanchine works.

IV The dancer as a producer of meaning

The selection of works in this study comprises a narrow sample of noncharacter roles, all of which generally align with Kirby's non-matrixed approach, yet include a range of referentiality. While the variations in Balanchine's *The Four Temperaments* are titled after the medieval 'temperaments' ('Melancholic', 'Sanguinic', 'Phlegmatic', 'Choleric'), and thus may be read as Goldie's personality traits, this is less obvious in the *Agon* solos, named after early dance genres ('Saraband', 'Bransle Gay'). In Forsythe's works, most roles are unnamed. At best, some are loosely denoted internally, in rehearsals. NBOC dancers who performed in recent productions of the second detail referred to their parts by the names of the original FB performers of the role ('Jill [Johnson's] role' or 'Nora [Kimball's] role'). Not all Forsythe staging experts, however, even use such denotations. Most often, in Forsythe's programme notes dancers are listed alphabetically, as a collective of performers. Other differences include the artistic elements of the works. *Steptext* is a quartet set to baroque violin concerto¹⁷, while the other two Forsythe's works are dynamic dances to the electronic music by Thom Willems. Several solos feature a dancer alone on the stage (*Agon* 'Saraband', or *Steptext* opening solos), while in others, a soloist relates to a group (*The Four Temperaments*, *In the Middle...*, and *the second detail*). While being mindful that a single dance role cannot stand in isolation

¹⁷ *Artifact* sections and *Steptext* use Bach's 'Partita No.2 BWV1004 in D minor, Chaconne', in a particular rendition by Nathan Milstein.

from the rest of the work, my analytical aim is to focus on dancers' conceptualisations of their solos.

Whether or not some aspects of their choreographies might be understood as referential attributes, the choreographers' published statements reveal that character effects were not in their primary focus in this repertoire. Even the arguably most metaphorically allusive example, *The Four Temperaments*, is according to Balanchine, simply a musical study of theme and variations, in which the composer (Paul Hindemith) denoted the dynamics and tempi by the names of the medieval temperaments (Balanchine in Reynolds, 1999, 161).¹⁸

Around the time when he stripped this ballet into today's practice-clothes version, Balanchine expressed his choreographic interest in 'the basic elements of the dance in its aesthetic manifestations, that is, in the beauty of movement, in the unfolding of rhythmical patterns, and not in their possible meaning or interpretation' (1992 [1951], 40). Recognising that story effects may be read in his works, Balanchine stated, 'I am less interested in the portrait of any real character than in the choreographic idea behind the dance action' (1992 [1951], 40).

The choreographer's idea, often translated through the staging expert's direction, certainly influences the performer – a sense of care for it is revealed in most interviews. In the 'Phlegmatic' solo in the NBOC version of *The Four Temperaments*, Aleksandar Antonijevic was coached by the repetiteur Joysanne Sidimus. In our conversation, Antonijevic reveals that in his process with Sidimus he articulated a fine, yet in his view crucial, distinction: there is a difference between conveying a character (the 'phlegmatic man') and expressing the 'phlegmatic temperament'. The role was difficult because the expression 'has to be subtle': while some characteristics of the 'temperament' have to 'be visible', a dancer 'over-doing it'

¹⁸According to Balanchine, Hindemith 'named the variations. He invented themes, made variations, and called them "the four temperaments." "The four temperaments" is a gothic thing; instead of writing in Italian or German — "allegro," "presto," "schnell" (fast) — he wrote a temperament — not that somebody's good or bad, but a temperament as applied to music' (Balanchine, cited in Reynolds, 1999, 161).

is 'out of place'; yet, 'not doing anything' translates into an 'abstract dance – which it isn't' (Antonijevic, interview, 23 October 2009).

While caring for the intention behind the dance, therefore, the performers also act as co-producers of the dance's meaning. This aspect is not exclusive to the work with répétiteurs, but is also revealed in the discussions about the direct work with the choreographer. For instance, describing the process in the Balanchine studio, his close collaborator, Maria Tallchief, explained in a published interview that the dancer would often read the meaning through the choreography:

None of us ever went up to George [Balanchine] and said, '...what is my character ... supposed to be about?' ...No. ...[H]e defined our character through his choreography ...because of the music. (Tallchief in Tatge and The Balanchine Foundation, 2008 [2004])

A subtler inflection stands out in Tallchief's statement: whether the choreographer aimed for a particular meaning or not, there was a possibility of the performer's individual reading of the material. What one dancer may have understood as the 'defined character' property of the music in the work may be different for another performer. As observed in the choreomusicological studies by Stephanie Jordan (2000 and 2002) quite diverse musical inflections are expressed by different dancers in their performances of *Agon*. It is plausible that different listening sensitivities may lead to distinctive effects in different dancers' performances.

Similar negotiations to those observed in Balanchine's ballets are noticed in Forsythe's ballets. *Steptext* – a structurally-led exploration, as the choreographer suggested, also includes a loose theme of the ballerina's 'incredible desire to dance' (Forsythe in Sadler's Wells Screen, 2010, online). Various ballerinas, who performed the ballet, were not necessarily led to construe the

role through this theme, however. Describing her approach in the opening improvisational solo as the *Steptext* ‘ballerina’, a former principal dancer with the RB Deborah Bull explained that she does not recall much discussion about the meaning of the sequence with Forsythe in the studio, although surely ‘I would have asked for more detail’. The task she remembers was ‘describing the edges of a box’: Bull was asked to visualise an image of ‘a cardboard box’ in front of her and to describe gesturally ‘its angles and its spaces, its uprights and verticals’ (Bull, interview, 17 May 2011).

The influence of social relationships between various agents in the work also emerged as an important factor. This is seen by studying two different filmed performances of Bull in *Steptext*. After her opening improvisational solo, Bull's duet with a partner follows. The ballerina seemed particularly engaged in risk-taking in her performance with Adam Cooper (film by The Royal Ballet, 1996). On this recording, Bull amplifies an off-balance approach in transitions and partnered turns, ultimately developing an arc of her role – a daring exploration of movement increases as a crescendo, as the work unfolds. When this film is compared with her later performance of the same duet (with William Trevitt, on MacGibbon, 1997), the arc of the role was softened. This time, Bull accentuated a sense of being in control (or in Laban eukinetic terms, the movement is more bound and direct). Various short-term differences in experience of the two performances notwithstanding, in the interview, Bull acknowledged that control is an important part of *Steptext* – a carefully measured approach is key. Being cast as a sole woman relating to three men, an assertive dance approach might have ‘easily’ crossed into the terrain of ‘a domestic drama’ (Bull, 17 May 2011). Nevertheless, a particular partnership (with Cooper) may have created a different interpretation, as Bull often ‘felt empowered to be brave and a bit different’ (Bull, 29 June 2011).

Choreography's social structure may strongly influence dancers' interpretations particularly in the ensemble works, including *the second detail*. In this ballet, a group of thirteen performers 'extend each part of the body to their personal limits' (NBOC, 1991, programme notes). There is a sense of cacophony of groupings performing simultaneously in counterpoint. Individual dancers break from their groups, engaging in short virtuosic solos, duets or trios. Critic Roslyn Sulcas described this atmosphere as 'friendly, jazzy teammanship' (2000b, 91). In *the second detail* some dancers find ways to amplify soloist moments, while others seem to embrace the idea of a dancing community in collaboration. Hayley Forskitt, a RB soloist, who performed 'Nora's role' with the Norwegian National Ballet is the latter type. Her solo is highly energetic. This virtuosic dance is recognisable by the strong melody of the synthesised organs and strings in Willems's score, underscored by the steady beat of the drums and percussions. The brief solo lasts about one minute and fifteen seconds, after which it evolves into a duet with a male partner (Paulo Arrais), situated within a larger group. As a soloist, Forskitt, in comparison with other dancers seen in the same role, clearly emphasised the group elements. Even in her stand-out solo, she accentuated the moments of unison. Among the viewed performances, Forskitt was the only dancer who looked at the positioning of other dancers around her (as if checking for synchronicity). Although brief, several details such as these amplified the sense of the soloist's partnership with the ensemble. In the interview, Forskitt explained that glancing toward the two dancers in the opening phrase was her idea ('I added the look toward them'), as she felt an impulse to signal an invitation to the companions for the journey. ('Come on girls, here we go!' was how Forskitt narrated the moment in our conversation.) In the later part of the variation, she explains that her pleasure in performing the solo was further increased in the moments when she felt in unison with the two teammates around her (Forskitt, interview, 28 April 2011). Because of her ideas, Forskitt's performance particularly amplified the possibility to express the sense of a community in the ballet; her

sociable approach also smoothed the seams between soloist and group sections in the choreography. In the interview, she spoke about her opening solo as an expression of ‘freedom’ to be herself, yet to enjoy occasional moments of unison with the others. The movement dynamics change, as the woman begins to work with her partner to accent the horizontal, oppositional forces – ‘pulling and pushing’ each other. The dance in her mind seamlessly shifted from the personal expression of freedom toward an overall theme of partners ‘trusting each other’ (Forskitt, interview, 28 April 2011).

Social relationships in the group also shaped Konvalina’s ideas about *the second detail*. As a principal dancer, cast as one of the male soloists in the NBOC version, Konvalina aimed to find a fine balance, by contemplating his identity as a solo performer in the choreographic structure woven by the group of ‘people relating to each other’:

Knowing his [Forsythe’s] process... probably he was not trying to create any story; it was just really execution of the steps and pacing of music... *the second detail* was about knowing the technique of it and how to interpret the sound and the noise... but still, I’m me, I’m myself on stage... (Konvalina, interview, 23 October 2009).

Konvalina performed the choreography with particular speed and virtuosity, in several instances asserting himself as a soloist, by bursting out vigorously while still performing in a confined space and without intrusion to a nearing group. As he said, there is a ‘double challenge’: ‘being a soloist, usually you don’t have to be with anyone’, but in this work even the ‘standing out’ possibilities still firmly remain within a group. In contrast with Forskitt, Konvalina says, ‘I did not feel much part of the ensemble, as much as *the second detail* is about it.’

I felt like I was part of this group, or part of that group... then reacting to this one... And so, I think I always wanted to be part of the group movement... make sure that I’m on the same music, on the same rhythm as the other people... In some way, it’s a challenge [for a principal dancer] to say, “...I can do that — I can be a part of the group”... I think *the second detail* was more about community, and how to be a part of that (Konvalina, interview, 23 October 2009).

The dancer's sense of own position in the social structure of the choreography, therefore, emerges as an important factor of both conceptualisation and the execution of the dance. The accounts by Bull, Forskitt and Konvalina show complex negotiations between different aspects, including the style of the work and their individual positions as the agents and contributors. In this respect, various conversations echo Hamby's point about the performer's sensitivity to the requirements of different choreographic texts (pp.11-13). Performers nevertheless sense certain freedom to articulate their personal readings of a role. Finding an individual approach means not just performing in an individual style, but also thinking about potential effects that might be produced unintentionally in performance.

This might remind us that the accent on 'conceptualisation' certainly leaves out at least one other possibility – a dancer who does not form clear conceptual images, but approaches a role rather viscerally. This was noted in one conversation about Balanchine's *The Four Temperaments* with NBOC principal dancer Sonia Rodriguez. From the spectator's perspective, Rodriguez's performance included a vivid range of musical dynamics, and there was an impression of intricate interaction with her partner, Antonijevic. In live performances, Rodriguez and Antonijevic accentuated moments of collaboration of partners in play. Overall, Rodriguez travelled through the music by finding dynamic contrasts between sustained and sudden movements, as well as direct and flexible affinities. In the interview Rodriguez shared that, at the time, her dancing was not guided by any particular conscious idea. The ballerina described her approach as instinctive rather than planned – she enjoyed the music and performing with her partner, but did not try to map out the role or offer imagery (interview, 2007, published in Tomic-Vajagic, 2008).

Rodriguez's non-conceptual approach, nevertheless, did not change the strong impact of her performing. She brought a distinctive contribution to Balanchine's text. Rather than judging

the dancer who does not offer verbal explications, therefore, it is possible to recognise the approach as non-verbal and less planned. Such contribution may relate to the findings by cognitive scientist David Kirsh, who collaborated with Wayne McGregor's Random Dance. Kirsh's studio research suggests that some dancers embody the choreography by 'thinking non-verbally' (2011, online). Particular dancers sustain periods of short- and long-term creativity during the process, and many times they 'don't think in words'; rather, dancers perceive and process information through their physical actions and think in 'visual, tactile or somato-sensory forms' (Kirsh, 2011, online). As Rodriguez's example indicates, the dancer may imprint strongly on a role while shaping the noncharacter dance through an embodied, rather than analytical process. Daniel Dennett's philosophical study of 'consciousness' may help us to understand this approach further. Dennett considers the significance of 'unconscious perceptual events'. These events are not necessarily analytical – rather, they may occur as a result of complex combinations of pre-existing knowledge of chains of events (Dennett, 1991, 308). Dennett exemplifies by speaking of extremely fast, seemingly unplanned and momentarily-activated actions, which are informed by our pre-existing knowledge¹⁹. The fact that the dance action is not always analytical, but sometimes relies on the performer's tacit knowledge and physical ability relates to the idea of the dancer's body as a 'cognitive medium' (after Kirsh, 2011, online).

In most interviews, however, dancers offered quite formed conceptual images of their individual roles. Below are five separate patterns of noncharacter conceptualisations most

¹⁹ The rapid actions that do not rely on planning but respond to our perception are exemplified by Dennett through a simple example: 'Suppose you tip over your coffee cup on your desk. In a flash, you jump up from the chair, narrowly avoiding the coffee that drips over the edge. You were not conscious of thinking that the desk top would not absorb the coffee, or that coffee, a liquid obeying the law of gravity, would spill over the edge, but such unconscious thoughts must have occurred – for had the cup contained table salt, or the desk been covered with a towel, you would not have leaped up. Of all your beliefs – about coffee, about democracy, about baseball, about the price of tea in China – these and a few others were immediately relevant to your circumstances, if we are to cite them in an explanation of why you leaped up, they must have been momentarily accessed or activated or in some way tapped for a contribution to your behavior [sic], but of course this happened unconsciously' (Dennett, 1991, 308).

frequently observed in the interviews conducted so far. The approaches and ideas below are not fixed. Rather, they are presented separately for the purpose of clarity, still keeping in mind that they sometimes overlap, even across a single role for any one performer. Unlike Kirby, I do not visualise this collection as a gradation, or an axis, according to the degrees of representationality. Rather, I propose an image of a constellation, composed of heterogeneous clusters of various conceptual modalities that defy a closed taxonomy.

a/ ABSTRACT IDEAS AND REFERENCES

Hamby's hypothesis that performers in abstract works focus on aesthetic and structural attributes of the dance is also apparent in this research. Here this was not a dominant approach, however, but one of five patterns. Some dancers emphasise that practice-clothes ballets, due to their spare decorative details, direct the performer's attention toward structural aspects. Merrill Ashley felt that leotard ballets oriented her toward the musical connections of movement – ‘the rhythms and the motions of the steps’ (Ashley, interview, 28 October 2011). Ashley's approach in the ‘Sanguinic’ variation from *The Four Temperaments* (on recording Ardolino and Brockway, 1977) is a good illustration. Although a non-narrative dance, ‘Sanguinic’ begins as a duet which resembles a playful encounter – a sense of symmetry between the two instruments in the music (piano and violin) is mirrored in the relationship of two partners. The dancers (Ashley and Daniel Duell here) seem to communicate through mutual teasing. Advancing across back stage toward each other, they start and stop repeatedly. As they unite in the centre, the woman kicks her legs high in six grands développés slightly shifting the direction of travel, while her partner sticks his foot in front of hers each time, as if to trip her up in a childish repartee. In this section, Ashley emphasises a broad, transverse dimension of her personal space, which projects an impression of freedom. Through mobile hip hinges and thrusts she favours bold movement and appears to roam in different directions

as the variation unfolds. In conversation, Ashley explains that she did not contemplate a particular meaning: ‘much of the early part is about shifting weight and off-balance movement.’ Her attention was directed toward the ‘suspensions, falling and leaning’ through the music, and alternating between being ‘pulled toward something’ and ‘pulled in many directions’. The music is a ‘life force, rhythm and impetus behind what you're doing’ (Ashley, interview, 28 October 2011).

Expectedly, due to Balanchine's cultivation of musicality in his company, music was a dominant guide for many NYCB performers. Maria Calegari, the performer of ‘Bransle Gay’ spoke of her variation as a small ‘jewel’ in the middle of *Agon*. The dance is choreographed to Stravinsky's intricate exploration of high-pitched music of woodwind instruments and castanets (and in isolated moments, strings). Owing to the castanet sound as an underlying rhythmic pattern, this section is often associated with a ‘Spanish’ flair (Denby, 1983, 449). Calegari, in comparison with other dancers in the same role, particularly emphasised legato possibilities (see Ardolino and Brockway, 1983). As analysed by Jordan (2002, film), several dancers perform the role through staccato accentuation. Calegari, however, glides through the music, and sometimes smooths the edges of the phrases. In her interview, the ballerina explained that she did not imagine stories to ‘fill in’ her role. With the focus firmly on the music, Calegari says she ‘often didn't get to the “images”’: I'm listening ... and that takes up the whole thing’ (interview, 14 December, 2011). If any images arose, for Calegari they were ‘abstract’ and related to a distinctive dynamic property of the work – *Agon* resonated as a warm, ‘golden flame’, while the *The Four Temperaments* struck her as ‘a blue, cool flame’ (Calegari, interview, 14 December 2011). Calegari's distinction between the two plotless dances may remind of us Caspersen's differentiation between her two noncharacter roles (cited on pp. 17-18). Caspersen, however, used quite specific images of gliding, running

and stomping across different imaginary landscapes, while Calegari's visual, colour-driven references are more ambiguous and uncontextualised.

Dancers who worked with Forsythe in FB also referred to musical elements to describe their roles. Jodie Gates spoke about the importance of 'the counterpoint and polyrhythms' in her short solo ('Tracy [Kai Maier's] role') in *the second detail* (interview, 31 August 2011). This solo follows Willems's music of isolated, dissonant rhythmic synthesiser sounds. Forsythe builds a choreographic response through abrupt shifts of weight, angles and directions of travel. There are plenty of turns and half- turns, followed by swift changes in the port de bras which are in synergy with strong hip thrusts and high leg extensions. As a result, the dance is manifested through a range of small movement bursts and surprises. Gates's approach particularly leads us to perceive new nuances in between short phrases: quick and fluid travelling between the steps is sometimes followed by rushing through the complex arm movements, then slowing down to allow the music to catch up. Gates's conceptual idea of 'polyrhythmic structure' and dynamic is mirrored in the effects seen in her dance: her conceptual idea was analogous to the nuances observed in her performance. Sometimes structural musical inspiration felt by the dancer is less obvious to the viewer, however. Jill Johnson offered an example of a dancer finding 'musicality' in various ways in performance – in the 'Second Act' of *Artifact* (1984) (from which some of *Steptext* movement material originates), there is a famous choreographic intervention: a succession of strong stage curtain drops cuts the viewing experience, while dancers unperturbed carry out a series of dynamic duets to the violin concerto. To Johnson as a performer, the curtain falls represented a metronomic effect, or 'giant, very obvious punctuations of the music' (Johnson, interview, 30 December 2008).

b/ NONFICTIONAL EXPRESSIONS

Dancers' ideas in some cases cannot be described as structural images, nor as expressions of stories. For instance, the previously discussed example of Konvalina indicates a particular, real-life contemplation as a dancer in *the second detail* (on p. 23). Similarly, Forskitt included reflective personal associations: freedom to 'be herself', nearly 'forgetting' that she was wearing pointe shoes, enjoying the stage relationship with her colleagues (interview, 28 April 2011). Elsewhere (Tomic-Vajagic, 2014a) I argue that Forskitt's personalisation shifted her performance into a 'self/portrait effect', or a subtle (and sometimes unintentional) intervention by which an impression of the first-person account by the performer is amplified, although the work is authored by another person (a choreographer).

Related autobiographical reflections are noted in several other dancers' accounts, for instance in Bull's description of her experience in 'Bransle Gay'. Seen as one of the dancers whose accentuation of the variation notably underscores the percussive elements in the music (see film, Roehampton Institute 1994), Bull's conversation echoed such an idea. She emphasises the significance of the castanet rhythmic pattern, which helped her to sense a closer relationship with spectators. Bull described her role in *Agon* as an intimate 'conversation with the audience ... which is punctuated by the rhythm of the claps':

It is almost flirtatious actually. And very much it feels as a role in which you're in control. It's as if the stage and the house stops on you for a moment... There is a different kind of power. (Bull, interview, 29 June 2011)

Bull's description includes an abstract musical dimension (the rhythm of the claps), but even stronger is her real-time experience as a dance interlocutor on the stage. This aspect again reminds us of Kirby's non-matrixed mode and the performer not pretending to be in 'a time or place different from that of the spectator' (1987, 3). Bull's experience of 'intimacy' and 'conversation' promotes an idea of revealing something about herself, which might be

understood as a documentary micro-narrative fragment, similar to Forskitt's example and also to Caspersen's description (p. 14) of herself in a moment of 'heightened concentration'.

Agon's 'Bransle Gay' stimulated other real-life references too. Nearly all dancers interviewed about it (Ashley, Bull, Calegari and Verdy) independently spoke of this solo as an expression of 'femininity'. While this meant different things to different dancers, it was always associated with personal experiences. Calegari emphasised the importance of delicate movements, particularly a slight softening breath in the shoulders, because '[i]t's always lovely to look feminine' (Calegari, interview, 14 December 2011). Bull and Verdy independently singled out the same succession of the steps (a gliding combination with unfolding arms in the second part of the solo) in which they felt at their most feminine. Ashley and Bull both described the expression of femininity as a less frequently highlighted side of their performing styles. Ashley spoke about the 'sensuality' of the 'Bransle Gay': although the dance 'of course is not flamenco', it has references to it, and some 'of that spice' in the 'changing angles, and the rhythm' of the dance (Ashley, 28 October 2011). She felt that the dance helped her to show 'another side of my personality that people hardly ever saw' (Ashley, 28 October 2011). Similarly, Bull felt that this solo allowed her to express otherwise infrequently highlighted facets of her performing style. Being a technically 'strong dancer' carries a challenge –'you're not often allowed, or not always able, to demonstrate femininity Generally, strength is associated with masculinity.' In 'Bransle Gay' 'it was nice to be extremely feminine' (Bull, 29 June 2011). These expressions of 'femininity' might remind us of Sally Banes's point about 'Bransle Gay' as an expression of the woman's independence and a non-stereotypical image of 'femininity', not conventionally 'demure or diminutive' (1998, 201). It is plausible, therefore, that this alternative 'idea of femininity' is

embedded in the dance text, but also that the dancers' embodiment of the material illuminates this possibility.

The use of autobiographical references in interpretation is not exclusive to noncharacter roles. A related approach is established in particular acting methods which have an objective to express dramatic fictional characters more realistically. Jerzy Grotowski's method, for instance, encourages performers to act 'neither in the character nor in the non-character' but rather to use personal experiences to achieve a more convincing characterisation (Richards and Grotowski, 1995, 77; Sorgel, 2015). The difference is significant, nevertheless. In the leotard ballets studied here the dancers' non-matrixed performing aims for no characterisation. As Ashley said, in practice-clothes leotard ballets a dancer is 'much more of a blank slate' – 'you don't have to be, or feel, frilly or pink or green, or anything ... but yourself' (Ashley, interview, 28 October 2011). Martine Lamy, expressed that the combination of the costume and the stage design affected the degree to which she would feel as 'a character'. As soon as she had 'a tutu and had a tiara on' Lamy 'had to' feel as though she were someone else: 'I would feel in a way more precious than I've ever been in my life. So, it's just automatic – I would have to elevate my state of mind to a place where I'm not normally' (Lamy, interview, 15 April 2011). Ashley and Lamy seem to indicate that their personal experiences are promoted as a result of the aesthetic properties of the dance work. The amplification of the dancer's identity may be an interesting specificity of the practice-clothes sub-genre. But, as found in the 'Bransle Gay' example above, it may be the dancer's understanding of the material that gives rise to this aspect of the choreography.

c/ DOCUFICTIONAL IMAGES

Lamy's account of her experiences in leotard ballets is particularly interesting because her other points lead us to an alternative possibility: while expressing something about personal

experiences, a dancer may build a self-image by combining autobiographical and fictional idea of an alternative persona. Lamy is the NBOC originator of the dance later known as the ‘Tracy’ variation²⁰ in *the second detail* (also discussed in reference to Gates's approach in a/). Recording of her performance from the period subsequent to the direct work with Forsythe (National Ballet of Canada, 1992) reveals a legible musical accentuation. In distinction from Gates who plays with accents by crossing the musical metre at times, Lamy didactically guides the viewer to observe entire phrases. In other words, if Lamy's dance were a spoken text, she would be an orator who carefully spaces out the sentences, while clearly delineating beginnings, endings and accents in between. In the interview Lamy explained that the solo was an opportunity to show her versatility and to guide the viewer through the score. To achieve this, she imagined herself as a ‘persona’ – an imaginary ‘French woman’ who could perform with a great dynamic range, sometimes ‘slowly, and sometimes really quickly’:

I gave myself a French persona — quirky, sassy, sensual, a kind of being who could do anything — from the quick footwork, to big jumps, ...a lot of turning. It was about trying to be as versatile as possible within that solo and playing with the musicality. (Lamy, interview, 15 April 2011)

This variant of an autobiographical approach, which blends real life and fictional imagery is distinct from the previous type of nonfictional accounts and rather might be understood as a docufictional approach. The concept is explained by film theorist Jean-Pierre Candeloro as an intertextual device, which emerges when ‘real life’ references are reorganised through formal tools and then ‘put together’ with fictional elements to achieve a ‘quasi-documentary dimension’ (Candeloro, 1999/2000, 41–42). French art theorist Nicolas Bourriaud finds docufiction used as a performative device in ‘altermodern’ contemporary art, and describes

²⁰ *The second detail* was commissioned by NBOC in 1991, and later that year it was reframed as the first part of *The loss of the small detail* (1991) in Frankfurt Ballet. Lamy created the role in the Canadian version, and her dance was the basis of Tracy's variation, in some part rechoreographed by Forsythe with his troupe later.

artists as ‘semionauts’, creators of ‘paths in a landscape of signs’. Such an intervention implies hybridisation, the weaving and establishing of certain connections between the self and the other (Bourriaud, 2009, 102). Similarly, the dancers interviewed sometimes blended conceptual pathways through their noncharacter roles, in order to express something about their artistic identities. Lamy, for example, wanted the choreographer and the spectators to notice her bold performing, versatility and musicality.

Similarly, Xiao Nan Yu (NBOC), another principal in the ballet (her role was ‘Nora's solo’, the same as Forskitt's) articulated a composite image of self as the other to highlight an alternative aspect of her performing style. Yu felt that the company perceives her as a strong classical dancer, and as a result, she is often cast in noble roles. Forsythe's choreography of ‘Nora's variation’ enabled her to show experimentation: ‘I can even dance with my back turned to the audience.’ These autobiographical references were integrated with Yu's fictional image of herself as a young buttoned-up woman who usually listens to classical music, now in a rock concert, ‘letting loose’ in the dance (Yu, interview 23 October 2010). Although strong, docufictional images for Lamy and Yu did not appear to function as drivers of (imagined) stories which anchor the role. Rather, they seemed to support an articulation of the dancers' artistic identities, value systems and ideological positions that they wished to signal to the viewers.

The two autobiographical categories, nonfictional and docufictional accounts (b/ and c/), together may remind us that the noncharacter is in some theoretical texts associated with the position of the narrator (as noted on p. 4). In Bal's theory, a narrator is a persona with an ambiguous agency. Bal notices that non-narrative parts of texts particularly may facilitate the narrator's agency through expressions of covert ideological positions (2009, 64). Often subtly interjected through the narrator's voice, such ‘opinions’ are interventions which amplify the

narrator's presence in the text (2009, 31–32). In dance, scholar and contemporary dancer Jennifer Roche theorised her own experience as a dance ‘narrator’ by suggesting her position of the moving ‘material’ through which different ‘choreographic signatures’ are realised (2009, 141). Similarly, dancers in this section used their noncharacter roles as interventions which helped them to question the established, or perceived, impressions of their respective performing styles. The imaginary other, as an avatar persona, may have served as a catalyst for freer statements about personal artistic values. In turn, we might again wonder whether the dancer's narratorial intervention may have revealed a particular ideological position, already covertly present in a particular choreographic text.

d/ METAPHORS, ALLUSIONS AND ISOLATED ATMOSPHERIC IMAGES

Some dancers used vivid isolated physical images, not necessarily personas, as metaphors or allegories which help to interpret a noncharacter role. Such imagery often served to invoke a particular mood or atmosphere in the mind of the dancer. Film theorist Rick Altman recognises a difference between isolated images which express an atmosphere and images which in succession form narrative drives. When an isolated image is not framed through ‘narrative actions’ it lacks patterns which would create a sense of following an event in continuity (2008, 11). As Altman illustrates, ‘[i]n scientific terms, there is no doubt that sunshine requires the action of heat-producing explosions’; in a text, however, the sun's shining does not necessarily produce a sense of a narrative, but rather provides the effect of ‘no more than atmosphere’, which is in contrast with ‘a story of sun's decision to continue shining in spite of humanity's wrongdoing’ (Altman, 2008, 11). In dance examples, a related distinction is already observed by dancer Antonijevic, who articulated a difference between his conveying a ‘Phlegmatic man’, and expressing the ‘phlegmatic’ mood of the dance (see p. 19). A related idea is conveyed by Geon Van der Wyst, whose solo in Forsythe's *In the*

Middle... made him feel 'not as a character', but instead, as he said, 'I did feel like ... a machine'. For this dancer, such an effect resulted from the work's atmosphere: the combination of physically challenging movement material and Willems's pulsating electronic music, paired with the lighting design in the Australian Ballet production (Van der Wyst, interview, 23 September 2010). Similarly, the contemporary international choreographer and a former FB dancer, Crystal Pite, thought of herself as an avatar 'in a video game' in performances of Forsythe's *AlienA/c/tion* (1994), but she did not speak of a particular plot-line of the game in question (Pite, interview, 4 January 2009).

Some dancers offered images of physical objects as metaphors. In *the second detail*, Gates developed her polyrhythmic musical expression by imagining herself as 'a percussive instrument': '[h]ow would I play? And how would that move me across spaces' (Gates, interview, 31 August 2011). Verdy, who explained that music always illuminated the 'mood, and maybe even an expression', developed an analogy between Webern's atonal music in Balanchine's black-and-white *Episodes* (1959) and a piece of fine Swiss cheese. The musical structure reminded her of the cheese image because it included an overt relationship between silence and sound – there were 'as many holes as cheese' (interview, Verdy, 9 October 2011).

These examples all relate to Altman's point about atmospheric, isolated images that do not produce narrative drives in different ways. Pite's avatar or Gates's musical instrument can be understood as anthropomorphic allusions, because they directly related to the performing persona of the dancer. The images offered by Van der Wyst or Verdy (a 'machine' or 'cheese'), however, were not associated with the dancer as persona, but rather spoke about the atmosphere of the dance work. The common trait is that the images above were unprovoked by the choreographer's lead. Yet, there were instances of images arising through a dancer's interpretation of the choreographer's guidance. For instance, working with Balanchine on the

‘Saraband’ solo from *Agon*, Bart Cook observed an image of a ‘jester’ during the choreographer's movement demonstration. This image served as a conceptual lead to Cook. He phrased his own performing style in the role by interpreting the choreographer's movement as a non-verbal signal that the role should be performed with a sense of humour (Cook, interview, 9 December 2011). This example of a particular type of persona may be considered as Goldie's ‘personality trait’ (p.14). An alternative concept is found in Bal's analysis of literary texts – a ‘character portrait’ may emerge in the work with a fragmented narrative. The personality may be indicated, but only sketched and ‘reduced’ to a type of a [psychological] ‘portrait’ (2009, 114).

All examples in this category show that the noncharacter may include personality traits, elements of character portraiture, and isolated images of physical things. A common trait, their lack of narrative drives (after Altman), may be particularly important for the analysis of noncharacter roles in ‘plotless’ choreography. Some dancers observed that a more oblique, nonlinear approach is a key distinction between their narrative and plotless roles. As NBOC former principal dancer Jennifer Fournier explained: ‘[w]hen you do dramatic, narrative parts, it is important to have almost sentences as thoughts ... but you don't do that in the nonnarrative work. For example, you don't say, “How are you doing?” in the same literal sense’ (Fournier, interview, 27 April 2011).

e/ THE EMERGENCE OF STORYBOARDING

By way of distinction from all previous modes, there were rare, but very interesting instances of noncharacter roles discussed by dancers as imagined narratives about persons in successive events. Particularly interesting were two independent accounts of the ‘Melancholic’ variation (*The Four Temperaments*). Cook and Konvalina performed this solo in different eras,

companies and in different proximity to the choreographer. Both independently described distinctive story-like events, and have translated them into visible effects in performance. As an illustration, I use the transition between the opening man's solo (adagio) and the following section (allegro) in which the man, initially alone, is joined by two female demi-soloists. As the piano and violin quieten, the man crouches on the floor, curling his back and closing into himself. At the onset of the rousing violin music, two women come in. At this moment many soloists hunker down and gaze low, but Konvalina prolongs the moment of turning into the crouching position, by slowing down the bending action, while sending a glance across the room. Although the moment does not last long, he makes us take note of the music's decrescendo, but also announces that something is going to happen. This accent, in fact, anticipates the onset of the jittery music when the two women enter, which is why Konvalina's approach implies a particular musical reading – the significance of the major shift from adagio into allegro. Nevertheless, the action also may be understood as a narrative approach – the two women represent someone (or something) familiar only to the man, who knows that they may appear and awaits their arrival. In comparison, Cook in his performance bows down in a more direct and quicker squat and remains passive for longer; he seems to notice the two dancers for the first time after he has risen from the crouching position, by which time the nervous music is already playing and the women circle around him on their whirlwind paths.

The contrast is in nuances, but it is very important. Konvalina's accentuation alerts the viewer to the significance of the first musical shift and suggests that the climax of the variation may be seen to occur in the middle of the dance. The finale of the variation with six women joining the man in his case is a progression simply stemming from the earliest major shift in Hindemith's music. The sense of the 'dramatic' arc in Cook's approach is quite different -- the shift from the opening adagio into allegro does not seem noticeable, certainly not a major

turbulence, as in Konvalina's interpretation. Rather, Cook prompts us to take note of the finale of the variation – the point of a strong energy build up, which coincides with a musical crescendo at which point the man faces six women together.

The effect observed in these performances relates to the dancers' accounts in their respective interviews. Konvalina stressed the significance of the man's interactions with two female demi-soloists from the middle sub-section, describing them as metaphors for 'two different kinds of melancholic moods' that 'the man' is fighting. He felt that it was important to follow the women's activities, as if wanting to know 'what they are doing all the time'. Explaining that in this variation 'it's all connected in some way' (Konvalina, interview, 23 October 2009), the dancer revealed a conceptual linear story-boarding of the dance action. Cook had a less literal story in mind, more in line with Fournier's suggestion of a fragmented sentence. His description of the 'Melancholic' resembled a collection of metaphoric images, including 'self-flagellation', 'being compressed' and 'melting down' (Cook, interview, 9 December 2011). In Cook's description, certain sections of the variation were noticeably more connected than others: the man's interaction with the two initial women was an 'obvious' narrative development, because the '[t]wo girls who come out are the barriers that he [the man] is wading through'. The finale of the variation, in which the man faces six women, Cook read as the man's struggle to resolve a greater 'obstacle' which was collectively represented by the six female dancers. There was a clear narrative drive in this part of Cook's description: '[t]hey are kicking at him ... He jumps in the air and collapses on a crescendo' (Cook, interview, 9 December 2011).

Both accounts show equally interesting, yet quite different, musical interpretations arising from the performers' respective conceptual readings of the choreographic material. They illustrate my earlier point that the noncharacter is not necessarily a negation of the character

(p. 5), but also again show that a dancer's interpretation may uncover less observed possibilities in a dance text.

It is nonetheless important to note that a performer who uses imaginary storyboarding may not necessarily produce characterisation in performance. I do not suggest that either dancer created the man's role as a cohesive *character* in 'Melancholic', although certain moments suggested personality traits and led to Bal's character portraiture. The imagined story might progress from Kirby's non-matrixed performing into a different mode such as 'received acting' (p. 16), depending on the degree of specificity applied by the dancer in performance. This may remind us of Bull's observation about the importance of the performer's restraint, when she wished to avoid conveying a 'domestic drama' in *Steptext* (p. 21).

V CLUSTERS OF MULTI-DIRECTIONAL APPROACHES: CONCLUSIONS

While the modalities listed above may not be the only possible non-matrixed approaches, in the selected repertoire referred to here they stood out most strongly. The findings so far show that there is no single dominant conceptual approach favoured by dancers who embody non-character ballet roles. Furthermore, one modality rarely occurred in full isolation for a dancer. Rather, this multifocality of the dancer's conceptualisation of the noncharacter stands out as the strongest overall impression. Gates, who thought in structural terms (polyrhythms, a/), also found a metaphoric image of a musical instrument (d/) in 'Tracy's role'. Cook's vivid account of the 'Melancholic' emphasised a possibility of a dramatic storytelling (e/), yet his overarching idea about the dance was the structural principle of 'theme and variations' (which aligns with a/) (Cook, interview, 9 December 2011). As Forskitt found in her solo and the duet (pp. 22-23), the dancer in one role may develop different conceptual images as leads in different parts of the same dance work.

Juxtaposing the different noncharacter roles may help the dancer to articulate intricate features of each discrete dance work, as Caspersen expressed in her comparison between two Forsythe ballets (pp. 17-18). Due to a deep familiarity with the style and repertoire, such cross-referencing between different texts in one choreographic opus was particularly emphasised by dancers from the choreographers' respective resident troupes. In either type of a company, dancers often saw their role in relation to other dances they performed in their careers. Dancers from the repertory companies offered fewer comparisons within a single choreographic style, but they sometimes observed cross-references to Balanchine in Forsythe's choreography. Gates, who prior to her FB residency performed with several American repertory companies, has a significant embodied experience of Balanchine's work. Although she does not recall Forsythe ever verbally referencing Balanchine's works in the FB studio, she could sense an occasional, familiar, embodied reference. 'I have danced enough of Balanchine, so those movements were already in my body at that time' – the body would feel a citation, 'Oh, I have been in this place before' (Gates, interview, 31 August 2011).

Although not dominant, a certain proliferation of the theme of dancers performing as themselves in the interviews may recall the opening example by Franklin. It is plausible that the dancer's heightened sense of self is particularly promoted in leotard ballets in which the dancer stands out as a highlighted subject, as noticed by Ashley and Lamy (on p. 31). Leotard ballet roles facilitated dancers' expressions of their artistic identities and personal artistic values. It may be, however, that the dancer's contribution amplifies this particular possibility within the choreography. Dancers approach the dance texts in question dialogically, sometimes literally so. Several performers conceptualised their position as interlocutors of the dance action in a dialogue with the spectators, or as narrators in soliloquies about their own artistic identity in the social system of the dance company (Ashley, Bull in b/). In some cases

(Lamy, Yu) the otherness of avatars or docufictional entities (c/) was used, not necessarily to tell a story, but rather to support the performers' articulations of their positions as contributors and artistic subjects. While more research is needed, it is plausible that the conceptualisations may be seen as one aspect of the performer's critical interpretation (after Thom, 2003), which in some cases may be seen as part of the dancer's agency.

The analysis of the dancers' interpretations, or indeed agency within the socio-cultural context of different ballet companies as social structures was outside this article's scope. For now, it may be noted that by paying attention to dancers' relationships with their noncharacter roles we often also learn about the dancer's ideological position and impression about her/his own capability to act within a particular institutional and social production nexus (company-choreographer-dancers). Overall, different modalities in this research illustrate the flexibility of the noncharacter role as a performing framework. The noncharacter often functions as a fluid substrate, allowing various undercurrents beneath the embodied experience of the performer in a plotless work. Although some performers emphasised key differences between a leotard ballet role and the idea of 'the character' (d/), most did not reject images, micronarratives and personality traits, sometimes producing character portraits, and in rare cases, even storyboarding (e/). In some cases (as in Rodriguez's example), the dancer's approach revealed the potential of the 'body as a cognitive medium' (Kirsh, 2011, online), not necessarily aligning with any conceptual planning of the role.

All these modes together offer a deeper insight into the rich relationship between the dancer and the noncharacter role. The diversity and multimodality of dancers' approaches reveals why it is difficult to visualise their conceptualisations in this text as a binary, or even as a continuum of an axis (as in Kirby's proposal). Rather, I propose that the territory of noncharacter performance is a multi-layered spectrum of dancers' approaches. In leotard

ballets by Balanchine and Forsythe there is a constellation composed of clusters of heterogeneous associations, none of which amounts to characterisation. Expanding our understanding of the dancer's polyvalent relationship with the noncharacter role helps a deeper understanding of the choreographic text, through the layers which the performer particularly aims to illuminate.

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