

Being in Unison: Being in Common

by Rudi Laermans

1.

Although the practice of unison is still alive and well within contemporary dance, it is hardly put into perspective or approached through movements in a more reflexive, questioning mode. What does the idea of unison actually suggest or imply, not only as a choreographical tool but also from a wider cultural or socio-political point of view?

At least that much is immediately clear: within theatre dance, moving in unison underscores the dancers' professional skillfulness. For only well-trained bodies can perform the same movements in a strictly synchronized way. Unison phrases actually put dancers to the test since the spectator quasi-automatically observes individual deviations or 'failures'. Dancing in the unison mode indeed has a sports-like quality and latently creates a competition among the dancers. An individual performer enacts the collective phrase more or less correctly, with greater or lesser virtuosity. Paradoxically, the spectator can only notice this through an inter-individual comparison against the background of the dancers' common effort, their shared concentration on the same phrase, which acts as a binding choreographic injunction.

Highlighting the competitive nature of unison dance is not the prime motive that Cecilia Lisa Eliceche's *Unison* unfolds, quite the contrary. Despite its title, the performance in fact does not grant the audience the viewing pleasure of many stunning unison moments in the strict sense. *Unison* rather displaces both the notion and the practice the title refers to by giving them a distinctive social twist and staging through dancing different modes of togetherness or 'being in common'.

2.

Overall, the at once collective and rhythmical articulation of movements made in unison confirms the widespread, cross-cultural idea that dance is 'the art of a measured pace' and privileges identity above difference, conformity above singularity. This traditional vision not only frames for instance corps de ballet practice but underlies divergent forms of social dance as well. Through the incorporation of modes of unison dancing that allude to both the history of contemporary theatre dance and instances of folk or ritual dance, *Unison* apparently seems to endorse such an inclusive approach.

The performance opens in the dark. One hears the sounds of rhythmically stamping feet and clapping hands, accompanied by roughly simultaneously uttered shouts or yells. The exact status of this short audio-sequence is difficult to determine from the point of view of both its sources (are the heard sounds pre-recorded or produced live?) and its precise referent (are we perhaps hearing an echo of some specimen of Latin-American popular dance?). At the same time, the opening part clearly evokes the kind of folkloristic dance that may be witnessed during traditional carnival parades or – in a quite different register – when a collective celebrates ancestors in line with a particular myth or cosmology.

After the audio-sequence, the four dancers – two males and two females – appear on stage and start to move. Although their movements lack the sort of austerity characterizing for instance the work of Lucinda Childs – they rather hover between ballet and Cunningham-inspired 'pure dance' – this section continually hints at the genre of minimal (or minimalist) dance. A strongly patterned, simple four-step phrase is repeated over and over again, though with some significant variations and conspicuous stops. Rather than instantiating the unison mode as such, the dancing seems to emulate,

even to simulate the practice of simultaneity in performance. Something like a *second degree*, 'as-if unison' develops, one that takes the activity of synchronic dancing as its primary model but without fully identifying with it, thus creating a strange fissure.

The 'as-if' impression is heightened by the way the movements are enacted and by the way the dancers relate to each other. In marked contradistinction with most professional unison dance, the performers do not act as moving monads, with each one primarily following with sustained concentration an individual trajectory that is actually quite similar to the movement routes taken by their co-dancers. Visibly but without emphasis, the performers foreground the connectedness or interdependence of their movements. The physical distinctiveness of their performance style is difficult to depict, yet the general effect is a commonality undoing the formalist character of the synchronically repeated, now and then also varied, minimalist pattern.

Right from the start, *Unison* indeed emphasizes the act of moving together as a particular mode of joint action. Through the way it is made, each singular movement is positioned as a distinct contribution to the minimalist phrase, which therefore resembles the reiterated motif of a carpet in which different threads are interlaced. Actually, throughout the entire performance, the metaphor of *dancing together as the interweaving of individual movements* directly inspires the performers' mode of enacting the score. Dancing together is thus re-articulated as a specific form of physical work or labour whose commonality requires a shared concentration on everyone's active share in the co-produced work or artefact. This not only implies a clear break with the latent competitive nature of most unison dancing in professional theatre dance. Also at stake is the notion of choreography, or both the composition of movements into a longer sequence and the definitive scripting of such a directive phrase. Like dancing together, choreographing may have a structural affinity with the practice of weaving, thus *Unison* suggests. The hint has a critical sting since weaving is traditionally a female practice mostly not recognized as art.

3.

On the face of it, something very different happens in the next part: the dancing not only slows down, it also acquires a markedly improvised character, thus ostensibly departing from the idea of unison. Yet why restrict that notion to the co-production of synchronically executed movements? The performance's title insinuates that the improvised section is as well a genuine instance of unison, though one not mirroring its dominant understanding. *Unison* thus proposes a re-interpretation that essentially comes down to a shift from 'moving in unison' according to a premeditated score to '*being in unison*' without pre-given rules or even a minimum of consensus.

The dancing is indeed now only informed by the negative rule not to go for the kind of predominantly smooth movements that are the hallmark of much contact improvisation. Contact, not the least direct physical touching, therefore involves micro-logical, barely perceptible counter-forces as well as visible counter-movements, even conflict-laden actions. The performers sustain each other's bodies or further each other's actions but their cooperation is everything but steady going: there are notable frictions, observable flight lines that counteract the tendency to become a collective body. The dancing thus continues to underline its immanent sociality, as the performers retain the basic impulse to interweave their individual movements. Yet simultaneously the dance avoids the suggestion of social harmony that informed the historical practice of contact improvisation. Or as Cecilia Lisa Eliceche puts it herself, in reference to Chantal Mouffe's thesis that democratic pluralism implies antagonistic relationships: '*symmetry without sameness*', '*equality without sameness*'.

In the closing section, the initial insinuation of a Latin-American-inspired social dance is retaken and given further shape through movement. A bastardized popular-cum-ritual dance unfolds that

combines loose, selective references to carnival dance in northern Argentina with traces of Basque folk dance. The net result is an imaginary dance that reactivates Eliceche's personal reminiscences of existing forms of vernacular dance within the framework of professional theatre dance. From a traditional point of view, which is for sure contestable, the rather drastic alteration in movement vocabulary involves a shift from 'high' to 'low' culture or from aesthetically legitimate to artistically illegitimate – or only partly legitimate – modes of dancing together. The section's ending playfully hints at and subverts this view. The dancers retake the minimalist movement pattern that guided them in the previous part, but infect it with elements of the enacted folkloristic dance, such as clapping their hands in unison. The act's blatant irony is actually of the critical sort. Indeed, a genuine political gesture is implied: 'colonized dance' takes revenge on the colonizing culture through a mimicking of the latter that fuses it with its repressed Other.

The bastardized vernacular dance also twists the literal meaning of the notion of unison. The word 'unison' comes from the Latin root words *uni*, meaning one, and *sonous*, meaning sound. In music, unison therefore occurs when two or more people play or sing the same pitch or in octaves. *Unison* generalizes this meaning into the idea of *unison as making whatever sounds together with more or less synchronicity*. The re-interpretation repeatedly surfaces in the performance and becomes prominent within the section alluding to folkloristic dance. The performers not only hum or yell together; the bracelets that they have put on also move along with their physical actions, producing a rhythmical sound. The ornaments are *chas chas*, whose genealogy can be traced back to pre-Incan cultures. Their makeup confirms the importance of the weaving metaphor within the performance: they are made of lamb hooves attached to embroidered fabrics.

4.

According to Jean-Luc Nancy, 'being with', or the fact that human existence is essentially co-existence in the mode of 'being singular plural', defines our ontological condition. *Unison* performs this primacy of the relational and subsequently re-articulates the notion of unison. It is thus foregrounded as *the 'uni' in unison*, the fact that both this very prefix and the practice of unison dancing (in any mode) point to the idea of *social unity*. Although 'uni' or 'one-ness' is commonly reduced to identity, social unity is neither logically nor sociologically synonymous with sameness. Beyond similarity (in moving, speaking, thinking, clothing...), social unity first and foremost exists in the mode of a force field consisting of dispersed differences that interact with each other. Social unity evidently includes moments of relational harmony, yet it mostly has the form of an assembled multiplicity (Gilles Deleuze) or a networked multitude (Antonio Negri) often marked by observable relational tensions and notable differences in power or authority.

Unison performs different modes of 'being in unison', understood in the broad sense of 'being in common' – of being engaged in the kind of joint action through which any sort of commonality is built up or sustained. The first, predominantly minimalist section apparently shows the performers obeying the injunction to reiterate synchronically a pre-given script, a small number of regulating norms. Like most minimal and repetitive dance, one is quasi-automatically reminded of the sociality typifying modern bureaucracy. However, this connotation is strongly counter-acted by the performing style that is preserved during the entire performance and consistently repositions moving as the interweaving of individual actions into a supra-individual configuration. In fact, something simple but decisive about the social is thus exposed: *the social fabric consists of individual threads whose interlacing may be intended but which also supersedes per definition every individual purpose*. Individual actions are the proverbial building blocks of any kind of sociality – yet the social, however defined, can never be reduced to these components.

A tension-loaded, improvisational 'looking for contact' known from the sphere of leisure dominates

the middle part, which is followed by the enactment of the kind of folkloristic dancing traditionally framed by binding norms and sacred precepts. In light of the different social configurations evoked by *Unison*, and even more so their societal counterparts, the closing section stages a double denouement. The dancers first stand still, upright, next to each other – and then slowly walk away in different directions, meanwhile posing as if momentarily frozen into quasi-sculptures. An implicit set of non-coordinated instructions directs their movements, yet this score no longer seems to bring them together. *Unison's* end thus hints at the vanishing point of contemporary sociality, even of sociality as such: a sheer mass of individual bodies avoiding direct contact. It is the script of 'the lonely crowd' that sociologists already described during the 1950s in rather dramatic terms. This script is literally author-less: the ideal of individual autonomy just brings it along in a non-intended way, particularly when it is freed from the last vestiges of traditionalism. There is, however, a second and definitive ending that like the opening sequence takes place in the dark. When the lights go off, the performers unite again and start stomping on the floor. Through the produced sounds, the short act suggests yet another kind of unison, one that goes beyond social unity and evokes the 'being in common' of all beings that is at the centre of both cosmological world views and contemporary ecological concerns.

Unison shows that the idea of unison dancing is everything but univocal. Performing together identical movements synchronically is just one possible meaning, which professional dance usually pushes in the direction of inter-individual competition and personal virtuosity, whereas social dance gives a primarily collective twist. In the end, *Unison's* principal stake is the nature of the 'being with' or togetherness staged by professional dance, yet seen through the lens of modes of 'being in common' existing in real social life. Professional choreographies imply social choreographies, especially when improvisation takes the lead or social non-contact seems to reign. *Unison* thus implicitly raises a crucial question: *can dance or choreography perform a sociality yet to come, a new mode of social unity superseding the opposition between identity and difference, sameness and singularity, conformity and 'marginality' or exclusion?*

Note

This text was written in two movements. A first and shorter version was extensively commented by Cecilia Lisa Eliceche; in the definitive version, I've taken into account several of her remarks and clarifications.