REDEFINING VIRTUOSITY: TRISHA BROWN IN THE EIGHTIES AND NINETIES

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WHEN SHE WAS EMBROILED IN THE EBULLIENTLY RADICAL WORK OF NEW YORK'S JUDSON Dance Theater, physical expertise—along with bravura performing—was something a dancer kept under wraps. Yet here was a woman who, orchestrating the mundane acts of sitting, lying, and standing in *Trillium* (1962), her first Judson piece, found herself attempting to lie down in midair. "I did not," she said later, "notify myself of my intentions in advance of performance."

Opposite page: *Son of Gone Fis* 1981. Sets by Donald Judd and costumes by Judith Shea. Pictu Diane Madden, Eva Karczag. Photograph by Joshua Adams.

If one takes "virtuosity" to mean not empty display but mastery of a form and expansion of its frontiers, then Brown certainly was already demonstrating it in the 1970s. Walking on walls via harnesses, ropes, pulleys, and tracks tested her dancers' stamina even as it derailed spectators' expectations about gravity in relation to visual information. Once she returned to the ground to choreograph, the basic vocabulary that she built on the bending, straightening, and rotating of joints was subjected to complex structural permutations that demanded extraordinarily nimble minds on the part of the performers. Watching Brown perform her 1979 *Accumulation with talking plus Watermotor*, in which she slips back and forth between two earlier solos and between two anecdotes she tells about her past, you feel viscerally the pulse-quickening delights of risk, the daunting job of memory.

Like her colleagues of the 1960s (Steve Paxton, Yvonne Rainer, David Gordon, Simone Forti, and others) Brown initially rejected enhancing lights, decor, costumes, drama, and fiction, along with traditional use of music. Gradually, she found ways to come to terms with some of them. The collaborations with artists and composers that she began in 1979 with Robert Rauschenberg's designs for *Glacial Decoy* have been rigorously untraditional. Rather than being simply decorative, the decor for her pieces ignites formal analogies with her own processes. The translucent, variously colored backdrops by Donald Judd that rose and descended during the 1987 *Newark (Niweweorce)* altered the space, confining and pressurizing some sections of dancing. The only music for *Foray Forêt* (1990) was provided by a marching band circling the block outside the theater—first heard faintly, becoming louder, then dying away to leave us in a deeper silence; what we heard enhanced the visual imagery of appearance and disappearance: movement flickering between still figures, light glancing off Rauschenberg's gold and silver costumes.

Crucial to Brown's work is her famously silky style. Although initially reticent about her influences, she once said something offhand about growing up in a forest. Aberdeen, Washington, is on a bay of the Pacific. Nothing about her dancing or her choreography thrusts itself at you head on. It's like something glimpsed between trees, influenced by tides. "I'm always trying to deflect your focus," she said in an interview with her old friend and colleague Yvonne Rainer. Her dancing—considered completely inimitable until she took it upon herself in the early eighties to transfer it to remarkable dancers like Eva Karczag, Vicky Shick, Stephen Petronio, Diane Madden, Lisa Kraus, and others—incites water analogies. You feel movement running through her body—spurting here, flowing there, diverted by new currents, but always delectably free and supple.

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From the 1980s, her dances have also reflected that complex fluidity in the ways the dancers intersect; almost colliding, slipping past or glancing off one another, setting up impulsive new lines of transit. Movements give the illusion of leaping across the stage, alighting on one dancer, then another. Brown refers to *Opal Loop/Cloud Installation #72503* (1980), *Son of Gone Fishin'* (1981), and *Set and Reset* (1983) as "Unstable Molecular Structures." Watching those combustible dances, your eye grazes on almost constant flux.

The audience for Brown's work of the 1970s could grasp her structures. In 1973, dance fans and lunchtime loiterers were watching her and three dancers perform *Group Primary Accumulation* in the sunken plaza of the McGraw-Hill Building. "Come *on*! Let's go," a construction worker urged his buddy; having grasped the 1, 1-2-, 1-2-3 pattern, the other shook him off: "Wait a minute. My favorite movement's coming up."

Gradually the structures became secret agents. Performers in *Set and Reset*, for example, kept dancing out of the main performing area, where they remained visible through Robert Rauschenberg's translucent side panels. To create this come-and-go play with the official edges of the stage, Brown created three phrases; two traveled the perimeter of the stage, along one side and across the front; another moved up the other side away from the audience and across the back. The dancers improvised upon these phrases—heeding guidelines like "be invisible" or "line up"—until Brown liked what she saw and set it. The perimeter phrases also "delivered" choreographed solos, duets, and trios to the center of the stage.

Her dancers have become increasingly virtuosic in the traditional sense (many with the kind of conservatory training her first company lacked), but mental agility is still a requirement. They can reverse the phrases she choreographs and perform them to either side. They can splice part of phrase A into phrase B, say, and then jump-cut to the end of phrase C and start

through it backward. Brown developed a method of building a dance in part as if she were a chef—calling for and assembling known ingredients to produce unforeseen consequences.

With the dances she called the Valiant cycle—*Lateral Pass* (1985), *Newark (Niweweorce)* (1987), and *Astral Convertible* (1989)—prowess vaulted into a new dimension. *Newark*, which premiered in the Nouveau Théâtre d'Angers under the auspices of France's Centre National de Danse Contemporaine, marked the first time in which Brown made a distinction between male and female styles. She had two superb men dancers, Lance Gries and Jeffrey Axelrod. She'd also had a streak of bad luck; her response to this last, she said in 1990, was "to work with very powerful, emphatic movement—the way I got into it was by shoving furniture all around the studio like a stevedore (the dancers thought I was off my rocker)—and that segued into an interest in men's bodies, like really saying, 'Okay, what do I think looks elegant on them? What can they do that I cannot because of my body structure?'" The opening unison duet for the two consisted of heroically strong, blocky moves, elegantly designed. For the first time in what seemed like years, Brown engineered pauses, allowed the viewer's eye to alight, or travel around the same body for seconds at a time. However, *Newark* didn't capitulate to conventional dance machismo; the men were lyrical in their power, and the women's fluidity didn't preclude strength. At one point, Madden spun while balancing Gries on her shoulder.

Having segued out of these heroic displays of mind-body virtuosity via *Foray Forêt*, with its mix of stillness and vibrant motion, Brown quieted herself down further with *For M.G.: The Movie* (1991), dedicated to the recently deceased Michel Guy, the French minister of culture who had so admired her work. For the entire dance, Kevin Kortan stood motionless, his back to the audience, and Nicole Juralewicz stood beside him for much of it. This spare work began

with the magnificent Madden simply running and running and running in paths that traced an invisible web on the floor. Quietness abounded. For *One Story as in Falling* (choreographed in 1992 for the French group run by the late Dominique Bagouet) and its 1993 version, *Another Story as in Falling*, Brown even abandoned much of her springy vocabulary, creating a long sequence of clear moves and gestures she dubbed "Little Man." The unemphatic rhythms generated an image of multiple, everyday Joes plodding quietly through their separate lives (the baggy red men's suits created by Roland Aeschlimann added to the effect). In its functional look, the piece seemed a kind of throwback to the 1970s. It was as if Brown were paring down from lushness to simplicity in order to reconsider her path.

It has often been her practice to dig into her past and present previous material in a new way. Perhaps the tantalizing vision of the dancer with his back to the audience in *For M.G: The Movie* influenced her enigmatic 1994 solo, *If you couldn't see me*, in which she danced without ever facing the audience—knowable only by her spine. In the early 1970s, she and her dancers had walked on walls, down pillars and trees; some ten years later, *Set and Reset* began with a group of performers carrying Madden laid out, head to the audience, across the rear of the stage, "walking" on air. In one section of *Lateral Pass*, Randy Warshaw was suspended from above on an elastic harness, amid Nancy Graves's hanging sculptures, sometimes dipping down to touch the ground beside his associates. Defying gravity reached an apogee of theatricality in the opening scene of the Monteverdi opera *L'Orfeo*, which Brown directed in 1998. During an aria praising Orpheus's musical gifts, dancer Katrina Thompson sailed across a circle of blue sky glimpsed through an "eye" in the black frontcloth. On almost invisible equipment, she flew joyously out of sight, tumbled back, and somersaulted away again—the very embodiment of music. And of Trisha's spirit.

The gorgeous vision also embodied Brown's pleasure in testing the perimeters of space and orchestrating games between the seen, the half-seen, and the unseen, as she had in *Glacial Decoy*, *Set and Reset*, and *Foray Forêt*. In this last, when she performed her final thoughtful solo, dancers appeared intermittently, half in and half out of the wings, like elusive memories.

Brown's experience choreographing Lina Wertmüller's 1986 production of *Carmen* made her reconsider the possible delights of working with pre-existing music. Ten years later, in *M.O.*, she tackled Bach's *Musical Offering*, and the following year set *Twelve Ton Rose* to the works of Anton Webern. In collaborating with famous dead composers, she did not simply allow her body to sing along with their melodies, but studied their forms and textures. She taught herself baroque polyphonic composition and matched her zest for counterpoint to Bach's. She captured both the sparsity and compression in Webern's pieces by rapidly coalescing and dissolving highly organized patterns.

Although Brown makes non-narrative dances, directing *L'Orfeo* meant she had to consider emotional content. Mixing singers and dancers together, she reflected the tale of doubly lost love through groupings, pattern, and gesture: finding her own equivalents for the flow of happiness and plunges into grief, as well as for the ornamental filigrees and long plangent lines of Monteverdi's music. In *Canto/Pianto*, the dance that she made for her company using music and movement material drawn from the opera production, she expressed the emotions in even more condensed ways, especially in a remarkable and almost stationary solo for Kathleen Fisher. The two halves of Fisher's body seemed at odds with each other—one flowing, one cracking: the expressed lament and the inexpressible inner tumult.

Brown's most recent works—three collaborations with visual artist Terry Winters and innovative jazz composer Dave Douglas—have presented a different challenge. We are used to choreographers who set dances to jazz accommodating the music's insistent beat, syncopations, and get-down tone. But Brown approached *Five-Part Weather Invention* (1999) and *Rapture to Leon James* and *Groove and Countermove* (both from 2000), armed with her own loose-limbed, witty vocabulary and her keen eye for form. In the first of the three pieces, for example, she plays lively games with the jazz practice of improvising around a known tune. The dancers all know a set phrase for the feet, but must work to top it with the arm patterns Keith Thompson is making up on the spot.

Some artists tackle "serious" subjects and dark narratives. Brown, an extremely serious artist—a master, a virtuoso—has never lost that heightened playfulness that marked her task structures of the 1960s and early 1970s. Wildness may crop up in her dances; so may risk and explosiveness. Never anger, never violence inflicted by one person on another. Amid the post-modern preoccupation with text, eclecticism, and sociopolitical commentary, her work shines with a particularly clear light.

Opposite page: *Astral Convertible*, 1989. Sets and costumes by Robert Rauschenberg. Pictured: Nicole Juralewicz, Wil Swanson, Carolyn Lucas. Photograph by Geneviève Stephenson.

Following spread: *Rapture to Leon James* (2000) from *El Trilogy*, 1999–2000. Sets and costumes by Terry Winters. Pictured: Keith A. Thompson, Todd Lawrence Stone, Abigail Yager, Stacy Matthew Spence, Seth Parker, Kathleen Fisher, Brandi Norton, Mariah Maloney, Katrina Thompson. Photograph by Joanne Savio.