

Carlee Mellow - In The Dark – Residency at Bundanon with Deborah Hay, March 2010

Many of Deborah's meditations on performance ask you to juggle multiple (sometimes seemingly opposing) ideas simultaneously. There is a yo-yoing between these directives for a while. Over time the practice enables you to shorten the distance or move from one to the other more quickly until you eventually find yourself attending to them almost at the same time. Almost!

My experience over the ten days was very much like this. One day the practice would feel energising and full of possibility and the next it would feel stuck and frustrating. I could sense the work ahead; the undoing, the unlearning and dis-attachment to my idea of what the choreography or performance in general is or should be. In Hay's words, "the catastrophic loss of former behaviour" felt a little over dramatic to me. Surely it wouldn't be that difficult to let go of what you know or think you know. Surely that would be a fantastic cathartic experience, shedding layers of former behaviour or ideas that were only weighing you down to make space for new and insightful information. Yes, yes and yes. I was totally up for it and thought I would totally be able to do it. In fact I'm sure I thought I was doing it...

Well before you can let go of the past you have to hone your ability to 'recognise' your patterns / sequencing. You have to be able to recognise them in order to surrender them right? And this is when I started to unravel...

If you are truly responding to "my body the teacher" within the framework of the choreography then surely whatever manifests in the body is an authentic response. Sometimes I felt like I had to modify my response because it was going to be read as a Carlee-ism. I'm sure this was not Deborah's intention but in trying to "remove the sequencing from the sequence of movement directions", I felt completely trapped in my own body, always second-guessing myself. This process felt counter productive and disrupted the instantaneous response to any feedback being received.

And what's funny is that I felt that through my own practice I had already started to deconstruct years of patterning that my body had accumulated. Not just in terms of movement vocabulary but also in the way I make decisions from moment to moment, where my attention is, my relationship to audience and my interest in creating performance in 'real-time'. But perhaps all I had done was add to the layers... In this process of deconstructing and surrendering our patterns aren't we just making space for new ones to emerge? And I can imagine Deborah's response as I am writing this. There is no time for new ones to form because you are constantly surrendering, over and over, every second, every millisecond (if you're that good!). And in a way she's right. But I wonder if it is possible to not develop strategies or skills that enable you to penetrate the layers of the choreographed body to hear the response of the cellular body – and then do these become new patterns and/or sequences?

Hmmm...

In theory, the notion of “Is there learning without thinking?” makes me scream, “hell yeah”, and this experience or sensation is very clear when you are on the floor in the practice. Mind and body find such an ease and synergy when you can remove the head, remove your thinking and simply respond to the feedback of the whole body at once in every passing moment. Simple enough in theory! Questions around rigour and how to manage that in a daily practice have definitely come up for me over the last couple of weeks. Without a clearly defined objective to achieve you have to reconfigure the way you approach and think about learning. My usual methods of accumulating knowledge or skill just don't seem to apply to this practice. And the way in which we measure progress or how well we are learning is also challenged. There is an enormous amount of trust that must take place. An agreement must be made with yourself – to look to “my body, the teacher”. And as I experienced on the last day at Bundanon it is ALL of my body as the teacher that unleashes a freedom and expansiveness of possibility. Not just the parts that you select and deem appropriate for performance even when you think you're not censoring what comes up from the feedback of the whole body at once. I am excited that this door has been opened for me. The practice has exposed the full extent of the 'performance' pie chart and has made me realise that I have only been working in a sliver.

“The stimulation that is received from the feedback fires the body in a way that you cannot even imagine. The potential of that place. You can't imagine it. You can't construct it.” Just one of Deborah's pearls of wisdom during the intensive.

I feel very fortunate to have had the experience I had on the last day of the intensive. It gave me a taste of the potential of the practice and without it I'm sure I would have stumbled around in the dark, confused and doubtful of my ability to move forward.

We all performed the solo for each other 3 times during the 10 days and it was clear that it didn't get progressively easier. The four questions that Deborah presents for this practice hovered ever so precariously over the choreography. They could offer such clarity at times and then in an instant become completely scrambled and dissolve in a big gooey mess leaving you lost and baffled. One run might feel okay and then the next could simply slip away from you.

Inspired by my bold and courageous peers I decided it was time to get over myself and give it a good bash. And what occurred was a completely new and unexpected experience. It felt completely out of body. I didn't recognise the person who had just performed 'In The Dark' or perhaps I did but she wasn't usually allowed out before dark! During the run I felt I hadn't actively made any decisions to move through the different sections of the choreography but rather each moment had just arrived on its own. I reluctantly use the word transcendence to describe my experience. One because I think there are some hippy,

spiritual associations that come with it and two because I don't know if I actually believe it is possible. However there was a sense of operating or dare I say it 'vibrating' at a higher or alternate frequency that allowed a lightness and openness in the work of attending to multiple things simultaneously.

Also on the last day Deborah throws us a curve ball - "You don't have to believe it", meaning we don't have to believe anything she says or believe in the practice we had been undertaking over the last ten days. Cleverly (or cunningly with a sense of humour) she removes the weight of the work reminding us that what she asks us to do is impossible and intentionally so. She intentionally suspends you in paradox, or contradiction depending on your viewpoint. This creates a constant place of questioning for the performer and the audience which keeps both engaged in an enlivened game of perception. What could be more fun than that!