

Deborah Hay Solo Performance Project at Bundanon 2010

Artist Report

Fiona Bryant

A Self Interview conducted May 2010.

What is your history with Deborah Hay and her practice?

In 2007, I was introduced to Deborah Hay's work through Ros Warby and her Learning Curve Project, Solo Dance. In 2008, I made the journey to Findhorn, Scotland in order to commission a solo from Hay at her annual Solo Performance Commissioning Project. And now in 2010, through this Bundanon Solo Performance Project, I have the opportunity to learn a second solo from Hay. In fact with Hay coming to Australia this year I have changed my plans so that I will return to the Solo Commissioning project in 2011 rather than later on this year. What this journey suggests is quite simple. Hay's work and my personal interactions with it have no end. There are no answers. As Hay once has said,

I trust that this is going to be a lifetime of material. Every once in a while I get nervous, and I think where do you go from here? And yet there is always another corner. It is really amazing.¹

Did you have a 'game plan' going into the Bundanon Solo Performance Project?

I approached Bundanon trusting there would *be another corner*. To be honest my performance of Hay's *I'll Crane for You* late in 2008, was not all that I had hoped it would be. Expectation can lead to disappointment. I am not entirely sure what I had expected and more than a year on reasonable explanation for this disappointment evades me. It (perception) is a strange beast. Who is the best judge of my performance of Hay's work?

¹ Arts Documentation Unit for the CNDO, *The CNDO Transcripts: Deborah Hay*, United Kingdom, University of Exeter, Center for Arts Research and Development, 1992. p. 12.

I found myself on day one of Bundanon saying to the group including Hay, “I want to get (from the next ten days) whatever there is to be had. I am trying to approach this project agenda-less.” Hay smiled knowingly before offering, “good luck.” Shortly after, during our first open practice, she coached the group, “watch out for the distraction/self sabotage that arises when attached to past experience – anything that is not here.” Indeed, there was no time for me to be attached or distracted by my past experiences of Hay, The Solo Commissioning Project or my adaptation performance. If I was to be receptive to “what was to be had” I could not afford to entertain anything that was not there.

So there is a kind of necessary detachment that is continuous. This sounds difficult. How do you manage it?

It’s interesting. Hay talks about *disattachment* rather than *detachment* and that in itself indicates the nature of this notion. My experience is that it is not a total dropping/neglect/forgetting of what I have experienced, be it ten seconds or ten years ago. Rather, it encourages a necessary loyalty to the vast amounts that are happening right here and now and a trust that the past, present and future can be right here, right now. I experience this as cyclical. Hay aptly expresses it coaching, *Here and gone, here and gone, here and gone...* It has to be really conscious, (I must also coach myself) here and gone, here and gone, here and gone... I think it’s human nature to attach to the past or think ahead to the next thing and consequently neglect what is here. That is where I think another piece of Hay’s language is so fantastic- *catastrophic loss*. This is not something I had heard her use before, but it really encapsulates just how dramatic the experience of disattaching from anything that is not here and now can be for a human being.

One of the other participating artists, Atlanta Eke, was in a similar position to yourself in so much as she had also previously worked with Hay and commissioned a solo. She described encountering a strong preference for the solo she had previously learned, and a struggle to ‘like’ the solo Hay brought to Bundanon, *In the Dark*. Can you discuss this a little?

Again, it is that trap of past experience and the human tendency to make quite simplistic comparisons between things based on feelings including like and dislike. When Atlanta expressed this struggled I did feel quite a relief. Not because I related, but because such a comparison (for example between *I'll Crane for You* and *In the Dark*) had not even occurred to me...yet. Perhaps it will come up at a later stage, I can't rule that out. I do think that how I feel about the score Hay presents me with at any given project is only partly (if at all) to do with the actual score, and largely a reflection of where I am at as an artist. I mean, an instruction such as, *squeeze as many movements as possible into a 1-meter circular path carved onto the floor, center stage*, written on paper is hardly highly prescriptive and if I am unable to (at least initially) celebrate in the endless possibilities this offers my whole body, then...something (perceptual) is not quite right. I think this also raises the importance of allowing both the 'dancer' and 'choreographer' to be present when performing the solo. This is so useful in terms of witnessing oneself from multiple perspectives and making decisions moment by moment, as the performance unfolds.

During the course of the ten days, did you have any particular 'ah ha' moments or fresh insights?

Yes. I guess one of these really follows on from what I was just saying about allowing both the 'dancer' and 'choreographer' to be present. In 2008 when I learned *I'll Crane for You* I can recall Hay speaking about this notion quite a lot. However, despite hearing it, I did not entirely comprehend nor experience its consequence. Now however, I feel like I have finally begun to experience it. I think this 'ah ha' has been supported by the development of my own choreographic work since 2008, including a shift to score based work and performance as a regular aspect of my practice. This has really functioned to equip me with a choreographic 'voice' and thus a place from which to make decisions and direct my 'dancer' in any given moment of my performance.

Another significant 'ah ha' was really from Sydney based participant, Georgie Read. I had been struggling with locomotion and a basic trust in my legs in both open practice and the practice of *In the Dark*. Somehow, my seeing seemed to be serving the rest of my body, but the legs were really 'stuck' and mostly unavailable. I recall Georgie speaking after one of her solo performances of *In the Dark* about a similar

'stuck' feeling. What was really encouraging was not only to hear her describe this struggle, but moreover her solution - to initially drop all the balls (the questions, the practice) and from that place pick them up one by one. To me, an individual who likes to have control, this approach seemed so radical, courageous and...worth the risk. I don't think I have experienced the entirety of this 'ah ha,' but I've certainly tasted it's initial consequence during the time at Bundanon. I have glimpsed what it is to not only *trust the whole body*, but moreover *to trust the whole body as teacher*.

Is there a particular residue the Bundanon experience has left?

Mostly, I feel a renewed determination in relation to Hay's practice and my interactions with it. What Hay described...like a dog playing fetch...he doesn't stop playing. That spirit of endless, eager play has been renewed.

Do you have a plan in terms of approaching your daily practice and the performance season of *In the Dark*?

I think it is very subtle but when I think about performance even if it is a second from now, it's not here. It is in the future. And I think by doing this we lessen our attention to here and now, by somehow putting performance in front of us, not now.²

I really love this statement by Hay, found in an old interview transcript. She is discussing performance in relation to what connotations the word has, and yet I sense that it is quite pertinent for myself in terms of how I approach the next three months knowing that there is a performance commitment at the end of it. My experience is that a fixed public performance date can be quite a trap if learned pre-performance behaviours dominate and are not consciously addressed. This concerns me.

On this occasion I am determined to maintain the rigor of practice experienced during the project at Bundanon! In this way, I am committed to performing (at the Dancehouse season in June) *In the Dark* as a natural continuation of my daily

² Arts Documentation Unit for the CNDO, op.cit., p.5.

practice and without interfering with the trajectory of my personal learning experience. Perhaps it doesn't take me three months to be ready for a public performance of one of Hay's solo's. And if so, I want to learn this and find out how long it *does* take. I think she (Hay) needs to hear this kind of information. Afterall, the parameters she places on the adaptation process are really based upon her own personal experience. I think as a researcher, she wants us to really use the adaptation as a laboratory for discovery. So, it is important, almost a responsibility to be honest throughout the entirety of the process, start to end.

Any final thoughts?

*Can you pass on dance without telling anybody how to move, by giving them a whole other set of parameters? Can you provide conditions for recreating the dance that are not about telling anybody how to move? How can choreography be transmitted without prescribing the performer's creativity?*³

I think it is a great honour to work with Hay and potentially contribute to the evolution of her practice. What strikes me time and time again is that her work, the questions at the heart of the practice, really haven't altered since she began her inquiries during the original Judson Dance Theatre movement (1962-4). The solutions have. Again, during Bundanon, I have observed the way in which Hay continues to probe at, *can you pass on dance without telling anybody how to move*, the transmission and reception of dancing and dances. She does not demonstrate and she does not say an outright 'no' to anything. I believe there is such a responsibility for those of us learning from Hay in terms of intensifying and continuing this probing. How *is* dance passed on? What is my role, *here, today*, as a 21st Century artist; in ensuring the dance does not stagnate?

³ Deborah Hay in Ann Daly, *Critical Gestures*, United States of America, Wesleyan University Press, 2002, p.53.