

THA-AT'S RIGHT

NOTES
ON
A FILM



BY
ROWLAND
HILL

A few years ago I made a short film *Tha-at's right* in which three dancers and a small crew attempt to choreograph a dance from a dance review, written in 1959 by critic and poet Edwin Denby titled *Three Sides of Agon*. At the time I'd never come across anything like it categorised as criticism: a blow-by-blow account of Igor Stravinsky's final ballet *Agon*, choreographed by George Balanchine, by means of an idiosyncratic stream of metaphor.

Reading Denby's text made me more aware of the nature of liveness and the tension between the thing itself and our attempts (always attempts) to capture the thing. Rather than making a film about the failures of language, however, I was more interested in trying to capture the generative potential that exists between text, image, movement, sound. In this gap emerged *Tha-at's right* which takes Denby at his word, reverting his imagery back to the language of dance. The following piece by Bryony Dawson – a review of the film in its loosest sense – returns dance to text, completing the circle of translation.



RESPONSE TO THA-AT'S RIGHT

BY
BRYONY
DAWSON

It begins with a room pushed out to its edges. Flatness rolled into it. A paper backdrop in royal blue, rolled down from a thin metal frame and secured to the floorboards with a slick of dark tape. An L-shaped blank: a stage. In the centre of this is the back of a girl. Loose hair down the back of a white t-shirt, backs of bare calves, bare heels planted in the blue. She wears the soft, stretchy clothes of rehearsal. When she spins to face you, the image trips and stutters. Little vertigo reel of a body arriving before thought – thought arriving to find the body already there – a face revealing nothing but 'here I am.'

My beginning is L-shaped and blank also, warm and whirring atop my thighs. What is it to translate a dance into language? To 'score' is to carve into, to scratch, to scar; an irreversible mark – and I've never been good with finality. Sound enters as a traffic of horns bleating 'I want! I want!' Clamour of all the ways I'd like to write against the ways that writing happens to me. I pause and try to arrange in my body a posture of focus: straighten the spine, slacken the jaw, fingers hovering, patient, limber. I want writing like the smooth vacancy of a paper backdrop: distractions pushed out to the edges, the soft stretch of time in rehearsal.

She is jumping, skimming, elbowing herself around the space. Arms thrown out as if to reach some far-flung thing, but her expression is absent. Like the disjointed bursts of a screen test she is images, not actions. Cropped below the knees, she slashes her hair into the frame just to show you what it looks like. The horns simmer into a dry, plucking spit then fall away. A sly cut produces a second dancer. Now two stiff bodies dodging and leaping like jolts of soup in a blender – some private game between them

The film often drifts or cuts from its blue-papered artifice, as if distracted, or turning away to think. Language spirals outwards, as if to tighten a centre. The hand draws an arc, the camera traces the hand, the arc rises from warm blue towards the lunar silence of the ceiling. I keep dragging back to watch the silhouetted hand slide, nudge, kiss an eclipse over the unlit bulb. The eclipse is a gentle 'stop!' to the film's ceiling day-dream. Cut again to the hand in blue, extending from the left, and here comes the net. Is this what language does to things – a net around them? Metaphor is invited, then mocked. Try again but faster: drop, fall, pounce, snatch. Have the net pounce even if the hand is willing. Tease the fingertips into a backwards flex. After the hand, a smile. The net grabs this too.

Likenesses are compulsive. To be writing about a film of a dance is to carry cut-out pieces of it in my head wherever I go and keep looking for moments that match up. I'm in the park studying the galloping courtship of big dogs, I'm in my kitchen watching two hard-boiling eggs crouch patiently in the bluish shade of the pan. Later, drifting (again) towards the grey dusk of my ceiling, I notice three large flies locked into a frantic ritual just below the unlit bulb. Together they form a determined triad, a tight scribbling punctuated by a lurch sideways, positions rotating at mechanical intervals.

In this new leather jacket she's suddenly so much a person. Going somewhere, doing something: a *me*, *mine*, *I*. Flat of the hand indicates STOP but also 'look at my hand.' The camera whirls to take her all in, but already the persona is rattling loose. Gestures lapse into disembodied movements like flicked-through tricks. Look – this wrist a swan's throat, this hand a soaring wing, these fingers a puppet's felt-tongued shout: 'ha-ha.' In the camera's spinning background, glimpses of a dim and absent audience, slumped on the sofa, checking their phones. Still, she builds the pace, kicks up a leg, juts her chin. A pirouette gives way to a jarring parody of a lewd thrust, concluded by a deep, smirking bow.



There's a strange relationship between the images on screen and the disjointed transmissions of sound that accompany them. If there is synchronicity or logic here, it is evasive, non-committal. The pink-grained blur of a jumping foot becomes a marshy void, its own sound displaced by a thin whistling like headphones left playing in a pocket. Other times, sweeping limbs and sustained notes glide cleanly from shape to shape like well-ordered sentences. Silences are calculated: pauses for punchlines to swell in. Sentiment, I think, is carefully untuned, but I could point to pride: it's a withheld grin, a starkly pointed toe. A burst of sudden laughter scuffs the surface of my thought – attention whirls for the joke I missed.

A major chord, the sun is out, a bright slant across the corner of the stage. It's a moment like victory but it isn't an ending, just press shots for some yet-to-be glorious resolve. All three arranged like podiumed athletes: a hand on heart, a bicep pumped, a yellow-ribboned medal around a neck, then *flash* – cut to listless inertia. R steps in to take a light meter reading, S appears to adjust the backdrop, but these interruptions are a performance too – another choreographed pause to defer the film's conclusion.

'Desire is *deferral*,' Rowland once said to me. To sustain the pleasure of desire, you have to delay the consequence. Perhaps rehearsal is a kind of deferral, a kind of desire. The pleasure of rehearsal is the not-quite-yetness of its dangling goal, and all the gestures of play, process and indecision that this affords. With its fickle cuts, drifts and parodies, Rowland's film indulges in the textures of rehearsal, while the finality of performance is only a flirtation.

It ends like it began. A single dancer framed by the blue. With bleached-white hair and proud, dark brows, she becomes ornamental and lithe, twirling her hands above her head. She moves in time to a prim little wooden *clop-clop*. Neat step forward, neat step back. She bends her knees for a sudden ribboning of arms up and down, then turns to walk coolly off-stage.

Film credits: Director, editor, choreographer Rowland Hill; producer Scout Stuart; dancers Svenja Bühl, Regina Laasmäe, Danielle Summers; cinematographer Paul Daly; music Rowland Hill with Jack Sheen; additional editing Ralph Pritchard; commissioned by Jack Sheen.

