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Soma-conceptual choreographic strategies in Boris Charmatz's *enfant*

Antje Hildebrandt

This article explores the sociocultural and political potential of touch-based somatic practices in relation to a performance by French conceptual choreographer Boris Charmatz entitled *enfant* (child) from 2011. By doing so it aims to bring together two seemingly incommensurable approaches to choreography: somatic and conceptual practices of dance. Moreover, by responding to the provocation posed by the editors of the special edition, I'm interested in examining how somatic practices, as essentially the 'undoing' of learned behaviour, can be extended beyond the body of the individual to the collective and/or social body. Ultimately it questions what the status of children in our society is and how touch-based somatic practices can embody a critique of social, cultural and political norms in the twenty-first century.

In order to bring forth the argument, my methodological position is clearly influenced by and indebted to the performative writings of dance scholars such as Susan Foster and performance theorists such as Richard Schechner and Peggy Phelan. Stylistically, my writing plays with a variety of visual devices such as italicization for descriptive and performative modes of writing as well as the posing of questions as a textual choreographic strategy to emphasize my subjective experience and position as a spectator of the piece.

It begins slowly and in silence. The stage is empty apart from two machines; at the front, a motorized crane. At the rear of the stage, an elevated steel platform gives way to a rolling floor system, a conveyor belt. The scene is haunting; it is gloomy and oppressive. The harsh and cold industrial landscape creates a foreboding and disquieting atmosphere. The only

sound produced is the mechanical metallic sound of the cranes' motor as it moves its parts and the rattling of the conveyor belt; the only movement is the automatic sweep of its searching arm. This goes on for some minutes. Three dark lumps lie on the floor. Lifeless bodies, carelessly disposed of like waste. The remote-controlled crane arm scoops one powerless bundle off the floor, gently sways and shakes it a little in mid-air and lowers the figure down to the floor. The same repeats with a second body. Then, the two motionless bodies are lifted up in the air and they dance an accidental other-directed pas de deux. Like a strange alien octopus, the crane grabs the three human bodies one after the other, dangles them in the air, dumps them and eventually drops them on the vibrating and pumping surface of the conveyor belt, where their bodies are shaken uncontrollably.

This metaphorical dystopian image of man and machine (or man as machine or man controlled by machine) serves as a prologue for the main preoccupation of the piece which centres on the relationship between child and adult and the question of the awakening of childhood. Themes of power and inability, control and consent, animation and lifelessness connect the three protagonists of the piece – man, machine, child – as the stage gradually fills with adult dancers, all dressed in black, carrying or dragging the motionless rag doll bodies of children in their arms and on their backs and shoulders. Are these abandoned, pale, inert, lethargic, defenceless bodies asleep, unconscious, drugged, dead? Slowly more movement is introduced as the adult dancers manipulate and handle the children; as they move them, twirling, rolling, swinging, and make them dance like puppet masters. A dancer swings one child in a circular flying motion. One lifts another child onto the back of a dancer as he crawls across the stage on all fours. As the movements become more dynamic, the playfulness of the choreography transforms and the relationships between the children and adults shift between tenderness and aggression. The nightmarish sound score by Oliver Renouf mixes

with a dance routine reminiscent of the choreography seen in Michael Jackson's Billie Jean, a strange fragmented soundscape of popular culture, a song where he refutes the accusation of paternity ('The Kid is Not My Son'). This whole section probably lasts around 45 minutes.

But then the tables turn as the children awake from their nightmares and begin a series of loosely scored but improvised sequences. They start to hum, sing and chant, one child starts to run and others follow; soon chaos reigns as the children skip, prance, march, leap and dance around the space, standing and walking on the adult bodies, dragging them around, adjusting their limbs, fiddling with their clothes. They are in charge now, autonomous beings with agency, an empowering force, taking control of the space, their playground. A figure reminiscent of Pied Piper (in German Der Rattenfänger von Hameln) enters the stage playing a bag pipe and the children start to follow him for a short while before they, in a liberating rebellious move, attach the harness on him and he is lifted into the air by the crane still playing his tune upside down. Even though the image is similarly constructed, the ending of the piece could not be more different to the beginning. We are witnessing an explosion of activity, energy and power. If the beginning of the piece opens with concentrated silence, the ending leaves us with an image of anarchy and chaos.

What I have tried to put into words in this introductory section is a piece entitled *enfant* (child) by French choreographer Boris Charmatz, a piece for ten to 26 children (between the age of 6 and 12), nine professional adult dancers and two machines. Charmatz, one of the leading 'conceptual' choreographers and dancers working in Europe alongside Xavier Le Roy, Jérôme Bel and others, is the Director of the Rennes and Brittany National Choreographic Centre, which in 2009 he transformed and renamed into Musée de la danse. Subsequently, in May 2015, he was invited to reimagine Tate Modern as a dancing museum.

For two days around 90 dancers and choreographers took over the gallery spaces and the iconic Turbine Hall. This temporary invasion questioned how art might be presented and encountered differently through the lens of dance in the future museum. Whilst Charmatz is certainly pushing the future of dance, choreography, art and the museum in the twenty-first century, *enfant* is clearly created for another context, the theatre. The piece was originally commissioned in 2011 when he was associate artist at the Festival d'Avignon, one of the largest annual theatre and arts festivals in Europe. It was performed in a slightly different version with only ten children and nine adult dancers at Sadler's Wells in London in January 2014, which is when I encountered the piece.

My main preoccupation with *enfant* concerns how the piece produces and challenges material relations in the social sphere through choreographic practice. In my research, I am interested in conceptual and post-conceptual dance and more generally, choreography in the expanded field. As a dancer and performer, I also have a background in somatic practices (particularly the Alexander technique) and (contact) improvisation, which stems from my formal training as a dance undergraduate at De Montfort University. In this article I aim to bring together these two seemingly incommensurable approaches to choreography: somatic and conceptual practices of dance. I intend to explore the sociocultural and political potential of touch-based somatic practices in relation to Charmatz's *enfant*. I am interested in how somatic practices, as essentially the 'undoing' of learned behaviour, can be extended beyond the body of the individual to the collective and/or social body. Ultimately the article questions what the status of children in our society is and how touch-based somatic practices can embody a critique of social, cultural and political norms in the twenty-first century. It should be made clear from the beginning that it is not the intention of this article to claim that Charmatz actually used Somatic Practices, and more specifically Contact Improvisation (CI), in the creation process

of *enfant*. Rather the question that concerns me is whether, and if so what, the final product, i.e. the performance, can reveal about the status and relevance of these practices in contemporary performance making today. In my analysis I am not concerned with the actual experiences that the children or performers may have had creating or performing the piece (this can only be speculation without conducting primary research), rather I am relying on my empirical aesthetic experience as an audience member of the piece to bring forth its broader social dimension.

As readers of this journal will know, Somatic Practices is an umbrella term used to describe different approaches and techniques for dance and movement training and education, including therapeutic and healing approaches, which take into consideration the whole of the body. The term ‘Somatic’ refers to ‘the body’ and comes from the Greek *somatikòs*, which means ‘of the body’. The term was first coined by Thomas Hanna in 1976. Essentially, somatics are sensation-based movement practices that are concerned with internal physical perception – the body as perceived from within. In order to become more in tune with the inner self, somatic practitioners will often work with closed eyes to preclude external stimuli. In the opening section of *enfant* the children move, and are being moved, with their eyes closed, and I am curious how this relates to the use of closed eyes in somatic practices. If moving with closed eyes can often produce an image of devotion to, and indulgence in, ones’ dancing, in *enfant* an effect of helplessness and vulnerability is created, and it is amplified by the fact that only the children, and not the adults, have their vision removed. The voluntary elimination of eyesight is here used to signal the passivity of the children. It seems particularly fitting here to remember what Judith Butler (2004) has termed our ‘primary vulnerability’, by which she means the ultimate dependence we humans have on others in early life. Butler states;

[t]he body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well. (2004: 26)

It is the omnipresent potential for violence that *enfant* reminds us of.

Furthermore, somatic lessons often include the use of skilled touch as a primary tool to ‘amplify sensory experience through the skin, the body’s largest organ, and therefore more quickly awaken awareness’ and enhance movement performance (Eddy 2009: 8). The use of touch is most prominently explored in one specific somatic practice – CI. This form of partner work, which can be thought of as an open movement score, involves one person lifting or leading the other person in a shared immediate experience of sensing and responding. It was initially developed by American choreographer Steve Paxton and a group of collaborators in the 1970s. The following definition was declared; ‘the improvised dance form is based on the communication between two moving bodies that are in physical contact and their combined relationship to the physical laws that govern their motion – gravity, momentum, inertia’ (Contact Quarterly 2005 [1979]: 18). The reason why I mention CI here is not to suggest that the children and adults in *enfant* are equally practicing this movement technique, but to show Charmatz’s relationship with it. Jonathan Burrows has written about his experience of seeing Charmatz doing the ‘idiot-child dance’ at a contact jam with Paxton:

[...] it was like the layers falling off the sacred cow of contact improvisation until you saw, for a moment, the thing itself. Boris turned the code on its head, pretending not to know the way the form worked and so returning it to the democratic principles and

sense of physical discovery it had always been meant to embody. (Burrows and Heathfield 2013: 136)

What Burrows is suggesting here, is that by subverting and interrupting this particular technique (which has become stylized), by acting as if he does not know its inner workings, by turning it on its head and by pushing at the all too familiar conventions and unspoken codes, Charmatz is discovering, in a physical and metaphorical sense, the less comfortable and more violent dimensions of ‘rolling, falling, being upside down, following a physical point of contact, supporting and giving weight to a partner’ (Contact Quarterly 2005 [1979]: 18). With *enfant* Charmatz shows that ‘contact’ in CI is not synonymous with care and support but can also bring out awkwardness, uncomfortableness and a sense of inequality. This knowingness allows him to expand and broaden CI’s inverted tools, and the unfamiliar images it produces respectively, to critically inform his politically motivated soma-conceptual choreographies.

A further conceptual strategy that Charmatz employs is the inclusion of children in *enfant*. The 43-year-old father of two children himself is, of course, not the first to involve and work with children onstage. I am thinking here of Romeo Castellucci’s *Genisi from the Museum of Sleep and Paradiso*, which contain visually rich images, such as a group of children playing in a box made of one-way mirrors. Or, *That Night Follows Day*, a performance text by Tim Etchells, artistic director of Forced Entertainment. Written for a group of 8–14 year olds, the work ‘explores the ways in which adults’ words and actions shape and influence young people’s experience’ (Etchells 2007). In the piece, a chorus of children ‘explores and interrogates the range of advice, facts, truisms, white lies and excuses they hear from their elders’ (Etchells 2007). Or Gob Squad’s *Before Your Very Eyes*, where the audience observe

performers between the ages of 8 and 14 in a mirrored box as the children onstage peer into the future at themselves as adults, and nostalgically look back at their recent past (2011).

According to Charmatz though, the child, and particularly the body of the child, and even more so when it appears onstage, presents a problem and a question. *How do we look at children?* Though some of the images created in *enfant* are visually beautiful, touching and virtuous, they are also perturbed and there is a ruthless sinister undertone to the choreography. The piece explores the sensitivities around the politics of touching children, addressing social taboos. Charmatz confronts collective anxieties over the issues of child abuse and molestation. He points towards the very real, socially pervasive and economically ingrained realities of child labour and enforced poverty. Now that I am writing about my experience of seeing the piece in 2016, I cannot stop picturing the young boy Aylan Kurdi found lying face-down on a beach near the Turkish resort of Bodrum on 2 September 2015, one of at least twelve Syrians who drowned attempting to reach the Greek island Kos. The shock and horror of the human tragedy brought by the refugee crisis (Smith 2015). Yvonne Rainer wrote in 1968 '[m]y body remains the enduring reality' (1968/74: 71) in response to seeing a Vietnamese shot dead on TV; her statement couldn't be more true in the current political climate. Charmatz said in a video interview:

[t]his here is dance: We touch each other – someone lifts you – this is how we learn to dance, not just by looking at photos and videos and by moving like Michael Jackson. We learn through physical contact. But at the present time it is immediately: Careful, don't touch children. For society the handling of children is a hot topic. Paedophilia is on everyone's lips – and not only in the Catholic Church. We are surrounded by fears. (2012a)

It seems clear that Charmatz does not want to trivialize paedophilia. But at a time when adults have become too scared to handle children in case they are accused of inappropriate behaviour, witnessing so much hands-on manipulation in a piece is refreshing as well as troubling. This is particularly true for touch-based dance practices in which the current regulations require for the choreographer and dance practitioner to be safeguarded. There is no doubt that these policies are in place to protect vulnerable adults and children from harm and this should not be critiqued in principle. However, *enfant* also shows that the issues are more complex and that we should acknowledge Butler's 'primary vulnerability' (2004: 26), which makes us human after all. By putting policies in place to avoid certain incidents, one can never rule out the uncertainty that life itself brings with it. What art, and in this case dance, can do is bring questions and problems into the foreground which may help raise awareness and break taboos. Charmatz is doing this by evoking confusing images and a multiplicity of associations in his spectators. On the one hand, *the child as symbolic cultural and social problem. The child as disturbing element. The child as thing. On the other, the body of the child as a choreographic tool to create challenging movement material. On yet another, the body of the child as a literal burden and/or obstacle, requiring someone to take responsibility, and requiring great trust on the part of the child in their total dependence.* *enfant* exposes structures of power as well as making the child visible, literally, as it appears outside the educational or community dance context.

There are moments in the piece when the child dancer appears precocious, which is uncanny because of its knowing imitation of the adult dancer; the 'trying too hard' of mini-dancers produces feelings of discomfort. The Hollywood childhood star with their pushy ambitious parents deprived of their light-hearted childhood. Furthermore, questions of exploitation arise.

Do the children know what they are doing? Are they capable of properly informed consent to their own participation in the performance? Does the piece discuss issues beyond their understanding (I suppose it does), and does this matter? How much did they have to be trained and disciplined not to move, smile and laugh in the first half of the show? And even though the piece takes clear advantage of the children's absolute honesty and their inability to fake emotions, there is also a clear refusal to view children with fear of physical transgression, to obey the media-fuelled fear of caring for and celebrating them in case it is read in a misconstrued way. By de-sexualizing them and re-treating them as innocent, they are allowed to be brave, bold, joyful, unselfconscious, equal to and not separate from adults.

Charmatz states that he does not want to 'show' children and their liveliness in *enfant* as this is what we would normally expect. Instead of starting from the idea that children bring life onstage, he wanted to begin with 'the sleep of children' (2012b). Furthermore, the children are not simply raw materials. The more the piece progresses, the more it becomes clear that they are truly co-creators in Charmatz's overall choreography and design. The children are not performing to the audience but instead receive the dance through their bodies; the dance is produced by others for them. They are the medium itself since the piece is made for the children, organized and choreographed around them. This means that the dance is coming, not through the eyes of the children, but through the bodies of the children to the audience.

Charmatz wants us to ask ourselves, how we would experience the piece, if we were in the position of the child. It is in the gap between seeing the children and imagining being in their shoes that the full extent of the somatic and conceptual fold reveals itself. As a spectator I am drawn between seeing and feeling, between vision and embodiment, between the visual experience of watching and the physical experience of the dancers. At times I am imagining myself doing the movements that the children are experiencing, at other times I am focusing

on how the adult dancers are creating this experience for the children. In this way *enfant* evokes feelings of touching and being touched in the spectator.

Natalie Garrett Brown has written on this embodied model of spectatorship in the context of somatic practice:

Somatic-informed dance not only removes the subject/object distinction between performer and audience via a denial of the visual as primary mode of engagement, but also offers an inter-subjective space for the audience through the employment of a dancing subject in transition and transformation, rather than one which assumes an objectified hermetically sealed dancing body. This allows for the proposition that the particular dancer-audience relationship invited by somatic-informed dance can offer a means to transgress binary representations of other. (2012: 69)

I suggest that *enfant* elicits, even demands, alternative modes of engagement and perception in the performer–spectator encounter via its use of touch and denial of the gaze – directly, indirectly and philosophically.

Nicholas Ridout offers another way to conceptualize the performer–spectator relationship in *Stage Fright, Animals, and Other Theatrical Problems* where he argues that ‘[t]heatre is a machine that sets out to undo itself’ (2006: 80). He writes, ‘in the modern theatre, something of our relationship to labour and to leisure is felt every time the theatre undoes itself around the encounter between worker and consumer’ (2006: 34). The case that theatrical employment in itself is involving a particular form of exploitation due to the economic condition of the

performers' presence, can certainly be made for *enfant*. After Ridout, I argue that the child becomes the signifier for historical, social and political moments that remind the audience of its fears of exploitation and domination, which it would prefer not to be confronted with in the theatre. In *enfant* this relation is even more amplified due to the purposefully calculated passivity of the children. This discomfort or even embarrassment makes the audience 'appear' when they would much rather sit in the safe dark space of the auditorium.

In moving my initial focus on the performer/dancer to a focus on spectatorship and perception, I do not privilege one over the other. In contrast, it has been the intention of this article to show the impact that touch-based somatic practices have on the experience of the (this) spectator. I therefore advocate for seeing profound value in this particular form of dance which extends beyond the subjective experience of the singular dancing body (moving beyond the idea of self-help, self-therapy or self-awareness) and addresses conceptual, critical and social issues.

enfant suggests the intrinsic power the child possesses in reminding us of our responsibilities as humans in the world, making us rethink our core social values, extending our understanding and the status of these youngest, and most innocent, members of our communities. This is the reason why it is worth remembering the words of Jean-François Lyotard, who wrote so eloquently in his introduction to *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*:

[s]horn of speech, incapable of standing upright, hesitating over the objects of its interest, not able to calculate its advantages, not sensitive to common reason, the child is eminently the human because its distress heralds and promises things possible. Its initial delay in humanity, which makes it the hostage of the adult community, is also

what manifests to this community the lack of humanity it is suffering from and which calls on it to become more human. (1988: 3–4)

enfant undoubtedly unsettles not only the adult–child relationship but also the spectator–performer relationship. As a piece of dance for the theatre it is rich in ambiguity, residing somewhere between simplicity and duality, nuances and complexity, light and dark, funny and sad, humorous and twisted, inanimate and animate, mobile and immobile, manipulated and manipulating, power and powerlessness, death and life, active and passive, gentle and violent, sinister and protective, professional and amateur, man and machine, object and subject, child and adult. Charmatz’s radical, surprising and thought-provoking performance, which avoids indoctrination and comment and yet leaves us with conflicting images of power, love, care, trust, fear, death, fragility and vulnerability, proves that soma-conceptual choreography can make us think critically about political problems and questions external to the individual body, eliciting, through performance, engagement with wider societal issues of and in the twenty-first century.

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