



## MASTER CLASS: INTERPRETATION AS A TOOL OR A METHOD?

by Cecilia Roos

*How do we conceptualize music and dance in terms of interpretation? How can we be inspired by each other's way of thinking and expressing ourselves? How can we personally develop our method of interpretation? Cecilia Roos gives us an overview of the understanding of interpretation, how it has changed over the years, how it might differ between dance and music, and where we are today in this master class presented at Choresound.*

I am so happy to be here today because the subject that we will talk about is at the very heart of my interest and thoughts. My starting point will be to explain where it all started, my point of departure. After that I will discuss the word interpretation and how it is used in the dance field in Sweden, and look at similarities and differences with how it is used in the music field. I will continue with my thoughts

about the dancer's process with a movement material, and end by discussing collaborations in the dance and music field today compared to what it looked like in the eighties. After that, you will have a group session about this specific question, which will bring you into the practical work. You are all very experienced, so you will recognize a lot of what I am talking about. You dancers will probably feel that I am too detailed. But since you represent different fields I have chosen to be very clear.



Questions from Cecilia Roos' masterclass.

I have worked as a dancer for more than 25 years, and my first engagement as a dancer was with the choreographer Margaretha Åsberg in the group Pyramiderna. That was back in 1982, and I had recently graduated as a dance teacher from the University College of Dance in Sweden by the time rehearsals began. To Margaretha Åsberg, it was of highest priority that we all reflected on the working process. She wanted us to write down our thoughts every day and these reflections were the starting points for discussions that we were meant to have continuously. This was completely new to me. In my education, I had learned how to exercise my body - but not my mind. We did not develop our thinking about what our bodies were educated in. And we definitely did not talk about it.

I remember sitting in the café at the Museum of Modern Art. I'm sitting outside and it's a warm afternoon in August. I have this notebook where I am supposed to write down all my thoughts concerning my working process. And I just can't get anywhere, I can't find the words and I don't know

what to actually reflect upon. I am completely empty, my mind is a blank. After a couple of hours, I have produced a few words... a half page, but I feel satisfied. The week after, when we are having our first briefing about our reflections, I feel something opening up, and that is a new world of language. There are eight of us around the table, and there are eight different reflections, eight different experiences of the working process and also as many different opinions about every single movement. My half page had by that time increased to three or four, but it was the discussion and not the number of pages that was important. I remember a feeling of joy about being able to participate and really understand what was discussed. These discussions truly made me understand the differences in how we all translate and interpret a movement sequence. There is not only one true way of doing it, or one true way of describing the process. Everyone has their own experience; everyone is carrying their own truth.

My interest in trying to formulate the dancer's process in working and interpreting movement material started during that period. I do not know where the notebook is now, but it would be really interesting to read it today. The need to formulate has grown more and more. In my profession today I give lectures at universities and schools of higher education for professional dancers. I work as a ballet master with the Royal Swedish Ballet when they do contemporary work and with different productions with actors, opera singers and freelance choreographers in Scandinavia. This has forced me to grow in my expression, and be clearer with my working language.

I have written compositions, articles and essays with titles like Thoughts that pass before the movements, To read the shape of a movement and my Master's thesis from 2005, The inner and the outer gaze of the dancer. My thoughts are not revolutionary at all – they are based on personal reflections from my own experience. I've used theory of practical knowledge and phenomenology to create a theoretical frame. That helped me put my thoughts in a wider context and to be able to ask other kinds of questions. But it's only recently that I understood for real how valuable this has been for my own thinking in my practice, and I really hope I can inspire you today.

### **The word interpretation**

There has been a discussion around the word interpretation and the use of it for at least 50 years. Susan Sontag said that "interpretation is the revenge of the intellectual upon art". The main critique has to do with the discussion of form and content. To interpret is to say, from the critic's view, that the content of something is different from the form of it. They think that an interpretation reduces the piece of art to its content. By that you tame it and make it manageable. That's

why some people in the dance field prefer to use the word adapt instead of interpret. But I'm not going into that now; I just want you to be aware of that discussion. Nietzsche wrote: "There are no facts, only interpretations".

The meaning of the expression interpretation has a wide span, depending on style. It is more common to use the word interpretation directly related to the work with a choreographer on institutional scenes such as the Royal Swedish Ballet, which works with repertoire rather than on the independent scenes. In a set piece, like Swan Lake, the individual dancer is mentioned as an interpreter. In many cases, an existing notated original (Benesh notation or Laban notation) is available as a source. The written code is rendered by a choreologist and with the help of a ballet master; the choreography is learned by the dancer.

Contemporary choreography is rarely notated and almost never outside the institutional scenes. What happens in the encounter between the dancer and the choreographer is paramount for the development and preservation of the piece.

The material for choreography is often developed through dialogue or improvisation. The dancer becomes an interpreter of the moment or the task, rather than the choreography. In contemporary dance, the word interpretation becomes a method constantly shifting rather than a system of codes and rules – like critical reading.

In Swedish dance, the expression interpretation was introduced during the latter part of the 20th century. Before that only the words translate or render were used. The University College of Dance established a professorship in the subject in 2003, as a result of discussions on how to define and bring out the dancer, not only as a tool for someone's visions, but as a creative artist. The first professor was Jens Graff, I'm the second. But if we check in the Swedish National Encyclopedia we cannot find the word dance interpretation. We find the word interpretation described in the context of music, literature, manuals for technical equipment, and acting, but dance is not mentioned. It seems like the word is related to subjects that have and use an object like a score or a book. For example, as a musician you usually have, if I generalize, the score. It is something that you can look at and read. The composer and the musician can sit together and analyze the structure of it. In dance, if the movement material already exists, you learn it from someone else's body. Either it is shown to you, or you pick it up from a video. When you learn it from another body, it is already interpreted and that is a big difference compared to the situation for a musician. The musician is much more independent. I cannot say that one way is better than the other, it is just different. I know the discussion in music has been that musicians become more and more into analyzing the score, than listening to

the sound of it. But do these two ideas have to be in a state of opposition? Stravinsky, Schonberg and Ravel were said to doubt the honesty of performers and their suitability to deal with the scores. "Virtuoso" was mainly a pejorative term to Stravinsky and he tended to prefer neutral renditions of the instructions in the score rather than the interpretations of certain excellent musicians.

The cellist Chrichan Larsson once told me that when he is about to rehearse a piece he has not played before, he never listens to any recordings of those who have played it before him. He studies the score just to build his own relationship to the material. After that he may listen. He says that he has no interest in the mainstream interpretations which always get recorded. They disturb his process.

We never got to that freedom of choice in dance, because so few can read dance notation – in Sweden I think no more than four or five people. And maybe that is a good thing. But at any rate, it affects the field and maybe that is one of the reasons for the trend of why so many young dancers prefer doing their own work. They do not want to wait or audition for a job. They want to be creators rather than doers. And they do not want to do what others have done before them. They want to be unique in their creativeness. But perhaps they just do not have the tools to plunge into a set material, because it requires other skills? It would be interesting to have a discussion about the identity of the dancer. We will not have it today, but I would like to reclaim the word dancer. I think that it is a misunderstanding to see a dancer as being a passive receiver in a process. To be a dancer is to be active and creative, whether you do repertoire or work with creations.

Now let's take a short look at how the word interpretation is used at the Royal College of Music, which is quite interesting. They always teach interpretation related to a style, for example interpretation of early music. Whenever there is a certain way the music should be interpreted, it is included in the teaching. The term is joined with something very specific, both style and time-wise and receive a meaning by way of the same. Can we compare this to how we relate to, say, classical ballet and flamenco? In this case we use the word interpretation when it is integrated in a style as a pre-conception or an execution model. From now on I will use the word interpretation, but I hope that I have made clear that my relation to the word is complex.

### **The dancer's process**

Let us now talk about the dancer's process. How can she develop her personal method of interpretation? What kind of methods and tools is she using? (I use she and her because I am a woman that doesn't mean that I exclude men from being dancers).

In 2004 I was dancing in a piece that had had its premiere in April 2003. We did not need to rehearse it that much because we were almost the same group of people doing it again. We memorised the steps and the already once explored details, without analyzing them any deeper. We wanted to lift the piece further, to develop it. But after just a few days we had the piece and we did run-throughs. But I had no contact with what I did, I felt and experienced nothing. I did the steps, but I was lost. The state of mind that I always enter in my dancing was out of reach. By this time I had been working a great deal as a ballet master, and now when I was supposed to dance, I had a rehearsal's eye on the material, which is a totally different perspective. After some research activities where I finally turned my gaze inward, I reached a state of mind that made it possible to dance. For me personally, it is a state of sharpness and clarity, a widened moment. Then I realized how big the difference is between embodying a movement material and rehearsing others in it. To be inside or outside.

What is the actual difference in between these two ways of acting in the situation and what did I do to be able to change my focus or gaze? Is it possible to describe in words? What is actually happening, beyond the movements, inside of you when you dance? Is it possible to describe the process from the dancer's point of view without sliding into the vision of the choreographer? Because that is what usually happens.

Let us make a brief analysis of the process. The first day of rehearsals of a new creation, you usually have a meeting where the choreographer talks about the piece, describing visions and reasons for it. Maybe there is music, some scenography which shows something, but the movement material is now about to happen. It can be created in many different ways, for example:

1. Improvised from a task that is given by the choreographer or by the dancer herself.
2. Grown from a dialogue between the dancer and the choreographer.
3. Presented as a readymade to the dancer to learn.
4. Presented as a repertoire that is done for, and on, someone else and has been done by others before her.
5. Presented as a material which the dancer improvises around in the performance.

Once you have learned the sequence, you dive into it. An arm can be lifted in so many ways – hesitating, accelerating, tensed, relaxed, etc. You try, repeat, change the accent, and try again. From the beginning, all the movements are powered by your will, but they need to trickle into the deepest layers of your mind and find a way out again. There is seldom an ideal way of doing the movement, it grows in dialogue. But the choreographer cannot have an equal dialogue with the dancer until the dancer is conscious of what she is do-

ing. It has to have a meaning for the dancer before it can have a meaning for anyone else. What I mean by meaning is another discussion. Meaning does not necessarily have to do with content.

When you work with a movement material you go through many different phases where no chronology exists. The dancer needs to:

- Create a shape out of what the eye has understood.
- Feel the shape, experience and explore it, and see the possibilities of it.
- Recognize a shape.
- Have a perfect pitch for the body's way of doing it.
- Learn to feel a shape, to see and feel in her own body when others are doing it right or wrong. Then to sense what is missing.
- Push it further.
- Give in to it, or put yourself in relation to it.

Keywords in this process are create, feel, experience, explore, recognize, listen, push, deepen, give in to and relate to.

I just want to clarify one thing – with shape I mean a movement sequence, and not a frozen position. For me, shape in dance is what shows in the meeting between the dancer and the movements. The dancer's professional skill is based on her asking the necessary questions of the material so that she can start to shape or reshape it.

When a longer movement sequence is there, another part of the process starts. You turn it inside out, you twist it, and you analyze all angles, dynamics, directions and accents in it. You “chew on” the sequences hour after hour, and some parts do not show until you leave them for a couple of days – or in the middle of technical work with a sequence, a deep insight can arise and something unexpected can happen. Something that works perfectly from the beginning can be totally without meaning or shape the next time. You can get technical problems, or when you put sequences together they might colour each other, in a good or in a bad way, which can come as a total surprise. And from that, the direction of the piece might change. The dancer's level in the process does not allow her an overview. She gives herself to the process and by that she gets an intimate knowledge of the movement material and the atmosphere of the piece. She starts relating and the dance trickles through all the layers of her mind.

Parallel processes are working, and I will suggest two now. First what you have understood about the atmosphere of the movement (which is an image working inside of you, consisting of knowledge, feelings and memories) and then the more concrete work that you do on the outside, with directions in space and the angles of the movement. This is like two poles, with a spiral movement between them, and

they meet sooner or later in the process. Maybe they create a separate space where your interpretation takes place? There is no universal chronology in how this happens. It is very individual and, of course, it also has to do with the character of the piece.

I propose calling some of the methods used by dancers during the process the internal and the external gaze. The external gaze discerns shapes or movement, the internal gaze perceives through knowledge, memories and emotions. External gaze has a visible and discernible intention that comes into play when she knows what to look for in the movement material. The dancer's contemplation is structured on understanding, and is interpretative. Her base is intention, reflection and action. The internal gaze can immediately recognize, or react to, movement material. That is not to say that the internal gaze stops there; analysis starts immediately, which then can start the intentionality of the external gaze. Gradually, the dancer becomes familiar with the movement material – it becomes visible. There is no objective to be attained, no final interpretation. As long as she is prepared to challenge herself in the process, the possibilities are infinite. In principle, one could say that the emphasis is on the external gaze at the beginning of the process, and it then shifts inwards to finally oscillate dynamically between internal and external perspectives.

The awareness of how to process a material and how to use experiences is a very important skill, and a necessary condition for your possibilities to be active and conscious within a process. In my example from 1982, when I was asked to reflect upon the process, I did not understand what to do a reflection about. I had no tools, I was inexperienced, I was happy and I felt satisfied that I was able to perform the steps. But the choreographer wanted us to go deeper, and that is why she urged us into reflection. We all have the possibility to do that in our bank of knowledge, memories, perceptions and experiences. And that relationship is not static; it's continuously changing when we live our lives.

My premise is that the behavior of a dancer is active and aware. The choices with which she is faced during rehearsals and performances require an active presence which results in her being active in the decisions. The dancer's conscious gaze is fundamental to her reflection and is always involved in the working process. The dancer reflects in her action, which enables her to interact with the variety and continual alteration of reality; as the gaze is in constant dialogue with the now and its phenomena. The gaze embodies our interpretative frame in a dynamic way, as we experience new situations. What we see is filtered through our knowledge, and then it takes shape. Every dancer represents an individual and the unique sum or filter of her experience. What the phenomenologist calls embodied experience, or the lived



PHOTO: ANNA VON BRÜHMSEN

body. Although we share similar experiences, we always interpret our experiences on the basis of our own existential situations.

What we see a dancer doing when she dances, is how she experiences her perception - what she processes and has processed. The dancer experiences the movement, and her capacity for further development of the material is dependent on her, not only on observing and positioning herself as an object in relation to the material. Perception, or the absolute presence, can arise in the dialogue and the encounter between the dancer's internal and external gaze when she, as a subject, places herself in relation to the material.

It is not possible to exactly repeat or copy a move, neither from body to body, nor for the same person from one day to the other. The original is right in front of us now, and now, and now. Only in the presence. Therefore one could say that the identity of the work lies in the actual discourse of the field, which constantly changes and shifts. In a creation, where the movement material grows in dialogue or through improvisation, the dancer becomes primarily an interpreter in her evaluation of the moment, rather than an interpreter of choreography. The choreography becomes the result of that.

When performing a piece of epic character, where every move is agreed and notated in advance, the task is clear. The dancer is initially the interpreter of the story or move - which, of course, also involves differences in interpretation, since no artist is like another. Here you also find a conversation between the dancer and choreographer - if she is alive - based on more solid grounds. The goal is clearer.

In my much generalized examples, the audience is experiencing the dancer's encounter and interpretation, either of

the moment or of a choreography or story - or both. Where in the process, or from what, the actual interpretation has taken place, is perhaps unimportant and not possible to circumscribe. It comes from the dancer working consciously and analytically while she comprehends the choreography and all the details and the possibilities of the moment.

The methods are individual and based on experience. There is no manual for how this should be done - the only thing we know for certain is that it is time-consuming and there are no short cuts. There is no final product - you are never finished in the sense final. You are finished when you have let every moving moment become a universe of possibilities that you are dealing with in a performance situation.

The outcome of my argument is therefore that the dialogue between the dancer's sensation as a subject with an embodied experience - a phenomenological body - and her analytical intellect enables her interpretation. Through reflection, the premises are placed in a dialogue with each other in the moment and the absolute presence, or the dance, can appear. So what is happening in the artistic process, behind motives and methods - as it originates? The gaze that is directed both towards the material and inwards, where we have our personal sensory landscapes, builds on our experiences. All our senses, except for sight, are said to be directed towards process. They are outstretched in time. Perhaps the dancer develops her ability to stretch her sight in time, expanding to every moment. A spherical way of watching, another way of attending, which you discover when you rehearse, because all movements get more and more unknown when you disclose all their possibilities.

Our attentiveness is said to be independent of our discernment, and that we in a new situation automatically direct our attention towards the differing and unknown. At first sight, we do not refer to the things we think we know. They are

excluded. Due to that, one could say that the dancer observes everything as differing – non-static - when she works. She really practices that ability, to look at everything as changing and evolving. By doing that, you discover the unknown in the things you thought you knew.

That is why I would like to strengthen a more brave and dynamic praxis. Where dancers build alternative and complementary perspectives by problematizing the mechanics in the rehearsal situation.

### **Contemporary dance and music in collaboration – today and 30 years ago**

When I was a dance student at University College of Dance in the beginning of 1980 we had collaborations with students from Royal College of Music. We had for example improvisation classes with musicians and dancers and composers made pieces together with choreographers. This was built upon a curiosity and interest in each other's fields, both from teachers and students. Discussions around parallel structures in the choreography and in the score, the movement – and the soundscape, the music in the movement and vice versa, space created by movements or by sound or both – all this and much more were the issues that we discussed in class. Outside school we had an improvisation group: Four dancers and four musicians who met once a month just to improvise together.

After my education, when I started to work as a dancer in 1982, the choreographers almost always worked in close relation with the composers. Some of them had met earlier in collaborations while they were in school, such as Windwitches with Lubomyr Melnyk and Fleshquartet, Susanne Jaresand with Dror Feiler and Lokomotiv konkret, Per Jonson with Sven David Sandström and Jan Sandström. The collaborations were different from each other; for example live improvised music to set movement material (for example Om and Bit Tzuzza), written music performed live to semi-improvised movement material (Islands), written music performed live to a set material (The smiling dog) and written and recorded music to a set movement material (Nimrud). What they had in common was the closeness in the process where the choreographers and the composers were in dialogue all through.

Can we find this kind of collaboration today? Or has the focus changed for both choreographers and composers? I have asked around in the dance community, and what I hear is that there are no natural meeting places where you can discuss and show your interest for joint ventures. But those people who complain about this state of affairs are not willing to create these places themselves, so maybe the interest is not that deep. Other people say that it is possible to collaborate

up to a certain level, but when you really need to deepen the work it is impossible because there is no money. The Royal College of Music and the University College of Dance have some collaborations going on today; students and teachers that hold open jam sessions two or three times a semester. But nothing is formalized, and as far as I am concerned, the master students of choreography and composition are not collaborating. When you look at the professional dance scene, you find few choreographers who work closely with a composer. Why is that? Is it because collaboration demands an extra level of awareness and knowledge that they lack, or have no interest in? Is it because choreographers use music like a click track when they need a pulse, and composers do not need dancers to illustrate their music? When I talk to composers they always ask me why choreographers do not use their music. If I ask them why the musicians do not contact a choreographer, they have no answer, which could have to do with an old hierarchy where dance is supposed to adjust to the music. Educational institutions have a major responsibility here.

How does this situation affect the dance field, the choreography? Before I start with my more general statements, I'd like to say that the dance field has really grown, and that the meaning of the words choreography and dance has expanded a great deal.

When I look at performances by Swedish choreographers today, I miss the timing and phrasing of the movements. It is either due to a lack of awareness or a lack of interest. Choreographers often work with conceptualized ideas, seldom from scratch. They use 4/4 and the choreography is also built that way. The length of the phrases of movements is kept in-between the bars. The movements do not have the integral problemized rhythmic structures that open up for levels and spaces inside the movements. I think what we need is to start building from new ideas of collaborations, where the music and dance field can strengthen each other. That would make them stand individually clearer, and thereby give birth to new ideas for collaborations. I am looking forward to seeing what will come from this "laboratory" week very much indeed, and it would be of greatest value if you all could formulate a program from your experiences and your ideas on collaborations.

Thank you for your attention.

Cecilia Roos, SEPTEMBER 2009

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