

Hilary Easton, a choreographer, and Tom Cabaniss, a composer, presented a remarkable work called "The Short-Cut" at the Dancespace in St. Mark's Church two weeks or so ago. Both are former teaching artists at the Lincoln Center Institute and important contributors to our approach to aesthetic education. They are both friends of mine and participants in an open-ended, energizing conversation about the role of the arts in human lives at different moments of growth-and, yes, at a peculiarly troubling moment like the present. When I say 'art' or refer to art education, I do not mean simply acts of expression, or learning to express the self through the use of diverse media and the exploration of significant forms. I am thinking as well of learning to encounter or enter into transaction with particular works of art: dance and musical performances; theatrical scenes; films, poems and works of fiction.

"The Short-Cut" is a work of art, if we are to judge by the opinion of a New York Times critic or the moved and enthusiastic responses of the artists in the audience along with many others, including a few young children. It is clear enough that the responses were not identical. Each one was to some degree contingent on an individual's age, life situation, cultural surround, past experiences, ability to notice, to listen, and to see. Whoever they were, however, they could not but single out the stocky, stationary man in a business suit, holding a stop-watch in one hand, a yellow pad in the other. Nor could they overlook the group of dancers in front of him, moving stiffly like automatons. He was timing their movements, of course, checking up, making notes. The meanings of this most likely diverged; but it is impossible to say that any meaning, any perspective was absolutely right or absolutely wrong. Relatively few realized that the man was intended to summon up the work of Frederick W. Taylor, who developed in educational contexts what was called "the cult of efficiency." He became influential in the 1920s; and, although his name is rarely recalled today, he was surely one of the forerunners of the proponents of high-stake testing, fixed standards, "bell curves", accountability, and the rest.

"The Short-Cut" suggests the manipulative aspects of such a movement. We may be made to think of the treatment of students as "human resources" to be produced in service to the technocratic society and of the peculiar depersonalization (yes, and silence) of those who comply. But "The Short-Cut," like many works of art, releases imagination and opens to possibility. The little man, perhaps the manager, moves around with a wary eye on the dancers. Then, gradually, gradually, each dancer begins to move in a fluid space of his/her own. Watching, sometimes moving imaginatively with a dancer, finding a startling physical awareness in response, members of the audience may come alive in unpredictable ways.

Here, of course, I find my metaphor--bringing together a notion of humanization and a particular conception of education. Recalling the automatic gestures of the dancers under the control of a stopwatch and notes on a yellow pad, I see it as one rendering of what Paulo Freire called a "culture of silence," in which no one felt himself or herself worthy enough to tell his or her story. This was largely due to an internalization of (in their case)

the landowner's view of them. They saw themselves as powerless, voiceless, lacking the tools of literacy; and their fates seemed fixed forever. They saw themselves as too ignorant even to think of things being different. The dancers' release from fixity into movement evokes for me the beginning of humanization, an ongoing process--of becoming--as muteness and fixity are left behind, as action and reflection help learners look at things as if they could be changed, perhaps for the better. So many images flood my consciousness when I think of what it signifies even to begin to break free. There is the prisoner in Plato's cave loosening what binds him in place and starting a slow ascent into the light of the sun. There is Virginia Woolf "shocked" into awareness by unexpected events, shocks, she wrote, that made her a writer and enabled her to escape "the cotton wool of daily life." There is Albert Camus describing what it means to be caught by routines until "one day the 'why' arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement. 'Begins'--this is important. Weariness comes at the end of a mechanical life; but at the same time it inaugurates the impulse of consciousness."

A "mechanical life" summons up the figures of dancers compelled into automatism by demands for efficiency. Of course people can function efficiently on their own initiatives without being clocked and assessed from without. Think of the dancers finding their own authentic patterns of movement. Think of young people searching for ways of shaping their stories, helped to believe that each person's story is worth the telling, no matter how different it seems from other stories. There is much thought today about the difficulty experienced by western people in trying to understand middle eastern stories, how difficult it is for Moslems, for example, to understand ours. I find, as you can guess, much help in reading novels like *READING LOLITA IN TEHERAN* or *THE KITE-RUNNER*. They help me attend to the nuances of different people's articulations, of struggles to make sense of the impinging world. They sometimes help me look from diverse perspectives on a reality supposedly the same for all of us and discover unsuspected facets that defamiliarize the familiar and make me take note of things in our shared world I never took account of before.

To invent situations in which multiple voices can be heard may well be to open the windows to cacophony. Also (as happens so often) it may lead to people seeking out and clustering with those like themselves--speaking the same language, telling their stories in similar ways, exchanging kindred memories. Most of us know that there is no way to impose a single perspective or way of knowing on a class of diverse young people--or to presume the existence of shared experiences like those that supposedly defined the common school. We do realize that students can be brought together in chemical experiments, for instance, in putting on plays, even in reading groups, so long as certain rules or principles are accepted: the use of hypotheses in chemistry; the connection between voice and gesture in theatre; the centrality of the "work itself" in a reading group. Within such frameworks, dialogues can take place; perspectives can be opened to one another and expanded to some degree. The realities of difference will remain, as will tensions between value systems and disagreements about fundamental commitments that may be increasingly revealed, even reflected upon, but seldom finally resolved. The best

we can hope for, I believe, is the creation of a culture within a school or community organization, sustained by principles that suggest the ways the individuals involved choose to live together--principles like regard for truth-telling, a concern for listening to the other, freedom of speech and expression, mutuality. As in the case of certain works of art--from the Greek tragedies to Shakespeare's plays to the current COPENHAGEN or DOUBT--passions and uncertainties, like all sorts of ambiguities--can be contained by a structure or form. What follows is not a final solution, but a release of new questions that might move those able to pay heed to new modes of reflectiveness, new imaginative possibilities, a new awareness of the phenomenal world.

This leads me back to the notion of humanization--of becoming a distinctive person engaged with others. I would like to recall the images of five dancers breaking free of the mechanical movements imposed upon them, breaking free to invent their own designs and rhythms in accord with others, all, in some sense, choosing themselves. When John Dewey or Hannah Arendt or Paulo Freire spoke of humanization, they reminded us that the self does not preexist; it is chosen, they said, "in the course of action". Choice and action: both entail a rejection of stasis and passivity. To choose demands an ability to look beyond what seems given and unchangeable--to be in the position of the speaker in Frost's poem, saying "two roads diverged from where I stood" and having no way of knowing which was best. Still, not to choose is to remain fixed in place or locked in one position without any notion of alternative possibilities. Or, as some have said, it is like coming up against a wall when on one's way and, instead of even looking for an opening, turning back on the way one came.

But, then, if we do not act upon our choices, they become merely theoretical; we may feel ourselves afloat on a sea of dreams, non-committal and secure. If so, we have avoided choosing the kind of person we hope to be. As educators, we speak of empowerment; and think we have in mind the encouragement of those capacities an individual requires if he/she is to be what he/ she is not yet, to become different (as Dewey put it), to have the imagination to transmute mere facts into intellectual possibilities, not only for the self-in-the-making but in the deficient world he/she inhabits. Surely, the power to think critically at a moment like this is a necessity for personal growth as much as it is for the sustenance of a free society--if not the creation of democracy. Like you, I suspect, I cannot but have in mind the downplaying of the wars in which thousands of Iraqis and Afghans are dying, along with American youth who can see no reasons for the carnage and whose voices, like many of ours, are being silenced. I cannot but recall the extension of corporate control over the networks nor the talk of closing down public broadcasting. And what of the recent reminders of class divisions in the society, of the growing gulf between rich and poor, of the emergence of the "hyper-rich" and the exposure of corruption among those once named the 'power elite'? And what of the intrusion of evangelism in public school classrooms, the censorship in libraries and in the shaping of curricula? I hesitate to mention torture or imprisonment without charges or the extremes of the Patriot Act.

I want only to relate the release of diverse voices and empowerment by education in multiple literacies and, crucially, in the arts to the tentative sounds of resistance to the misuses of power. It is not the first time that education for becoming, for reflection, and for imaginative awakenings was falsified and undermined. But it may be the first time that education for the release of human powers was attacked by right wing forces finding justification in the will of the power they link to something or someone they unforgivably call 'god'. The transformation of education is no longer a merely academic matter or a matter of cheerful generalizations and clichés. It is a political struggle as much as a pedagogical struggle. And, yes, if the function of the arts is to open windows on the possible--on what might be and what ought to be--it has to be an aesthetic struggle as well. I choose to conclude with some words by T.S. Eliot, who might not have agreed with me, but still...

*And so each venture*

*Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate*

.....

*There is only the fight to recover what has been lost*

*And found again and lost again and again; and now, under conditions loss.*

*That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain or loss.*

*For us, there is only the trying.*