

RUNNING HEAD: Unraveling

Unraveling the Postmodern Spiral:  
Jane Comfort and Company and Tiffany Mills Company

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In an attempt to qualify in definite terms the idea of “postmodern dance,” one can easily lose herself trying to patch together the multitude of ideas, dogmas, and intents that make it up. The artists of the Judson Church Group<sup>1</sup> experimented with expanding traditional dance movement vocabulary and emphasized presenting compositional form above story telling and virtuosity. The hierarchy of venues where proscenium theaters were the pinnacle of performance was questioned, and saying nothing became loud and impactful. Over the course of fifty years, artists’ goals and the truths about postmodern dance became more porous, with old and new ideas flowing in and out of concrete delineation. The dance movement that began as an interest in stripping down the acquired ornamentations and theatrics of Graham<sup>2</sup> or Humphrey’s<sup>3</sup> modern dance became about much more than pure dance, which in turn makes it much more difficult to contain.

Dance as a political statement, as a medium to question gender and race identities, or as a sensory exploration have all become part of postmodern dance. Elements of theater have been integrated into many artists’ work, and athleticism and precision share the stage with subtlety and intellect. In a sense, postmodern dance has come full circle from the era of rejecting virtuosity and presentation, but with expanded conditions. Postmodern dance has spiraled out. Two artists whose works are clearly bred out of the aesthetics of postmodernism, but fall at different locations on the postmodern spiral are Jane Comfort and Tiffany Mills. While Comfort creates dance works that incite very concrete images or address immediate ideas, Mills “specializes in violently visceral movement” (Tobias, 2004). Both women are successful, contemporary artists in dance who represent distinct possibilities of postmodern dance today.

Since the early 1980s, Jane Comfort has been making work with her New York-based company, consistently gaining acclaim and accolades. Lisa Niedermeyer, a company member

since 2002, states that any topic is “fair game [for Jane’s use] if it helps create a world, tell a story, create a physical metaphor” (personal communication, March 29, 2008). Neidermeyer emphasizes Comfort’s inclusiveness in all aspects of her art making, from her dancers’ training, body type and color, to her varying means of communication. Just as any topic is “fair game” for interpretation, Comfort communicates her ideas with the belief that any means of visual or aural stimulation can be used; her ideas about dance and communication are not limited narrowly to movement or movement to music. Rather, she builds stories and metaphors utilizing text, sound, and puppetry, abstracting and deconstructing every element to create new and often more complex meanings. The multiplicity of her works grows naturally out of her ability to combine all these elements and their eventual deconstructions with compositional dexterity.

Deborah Jowitt states that “linear narrative rarely makes an appearance in postmodern dance” (2004), a generalization which is true for most of Comfort’s work. In her 1998 Bessie award-winning *Underground River*, audiences are led back and forth between scenes in a hospital where a young girl in a coma is being cared for, and scenes from the girl’s subconscious mind. Comfort does not let the audience settle in any one place, but rather creates an interesting microcosm of in-between-ness; the young girl is in between life and death, reality and dream, and the audience watches at the intersections of these worlds. A few years later, surrealism and fragmentation are still alive in *Fleeting Thoughts: Mr. Henderson’s 3AM* in 2006, where “broken-off narratives [and] non sequiturs [...] slide together the way they do in dreams” (Jowitt, 2006). One explanation for the absence of dramatic arc in Comfort and many other postmodern choreographers’ works is that the relevance of the work lies more in offering suggestions than in laying out a detailed plot. The absence of traditional narrative form opens the door to many more interpretations and meanings for the audience. In *Fleeting Thoughts*, when the image shifts

abruptly from a hip swiveling Brazilian loft party with flirty birds to a dark scene of two people painstakingly inspecting and invading an inanimate body on the floor, audiences may not know why Comfort chooses to juxtapose these sequences, but witnessing them within one work becomes more meaningful than seeing them individually.

Comfort took a break from the aesthetic of disorientation and interplaying episodes in 2004's *Persephone* to tell the title character's mythic story. Without any patching or layering of plotlines or disorienting of the audience, Comfort presented the story with simplicity and straightforwardness. Her audiences and dance critics took note of her obvious deviation from the non-linear narrative of her past repertory. Neidermeyer states that Comfort made a "conscious choice to work in this different way" (personal communication, March 29, 2008) taking steps such as bringing a dramaturge into rehearsals. Does this shift in story-telling method pull Comfort out of postmodern ideals? Did she break the rules of avant-garde? Not even close; by paring down her focus to the emotional presentations of her performers, Comfort found a way to bring her audience in, while still maintaining her aesthetic of precision with fully expressive bodies. In this case, it would seem her dance theater dabbled into the realm of sensorial dance. In contrast to the disjuncture audiences may have expected, Comfort delivered a clear plot, simple costuming, and pure emotion, connecting the dancers and audiences to their humanness. Anna Halprin, in an interview with Janice Ross in 1991 stated that connecting to one's humanness is the catalyst to expanding dance audiences beyond the experts and the elite. Once again, Comfort shows her inclusive and open nature.

As a postmodern artist who emerged out of the 1980s, Comfort has clear interests in political themes, especially those of social responsibility and gender identity. She has a candid agenda, addressing the issues she believes in head-on in *S/He*, where she looks at gender identity

and treatment, in *Three Bagatelles for the Righteous*, a satirical look at politicking, and most recently in *American Rendition*, where she disturbingly juxtaposes Americans' obsession with reality television with the terrifying reality of interrogation and torture. In all three of these works, Comfort uses found text rather than invented text to provide part of the sound score. From political speeches and court depositions, to official forms such as missing person's reports, Comfort's use of quotes makes her work relevant and immediate. In addition, she avoids the linear plotline she visited in *Persephone*. Just as her texts become more complex through her layering and fracturing, the disjointed nature of her narrative encourages multiple understandings of the content and presentation.

From linear to jump-and-cut, the through-line of Comfort's works is her theatric devices. No critic seems able to address her work without first emphasizing her innovative and skillful use of text. In addition to text though, Comfort is skilled in creating visual stimuli beyond dance movement to enhance and sometimes to solidify her abstract ideas. In *Persephone*, as a shrieking and hysterical Hayes rips up the flooring tape, the audience actually witnesses a cast of dancers roll back the pure, white dance floor to reveal a stark, black Underworld. It is as if because of her grief over her daughter's kidnapping, Hayes destroys her own environment and takes the audience to Hades' hell. In addition to being completely logical, this choice is also surprising when audiences are not accustomed to seeing such dramatically choreographed set changes. In *Underground River*, a delicate, paper-thin puppet, and other lithe props enhance Comfort's play on the frail balance of her coma victim between reality and unconsciousness, until in the end, a shower of aqua feathers float down on the dancing performers who represent the victim's subconscious. Empty intentions and conniving manipulations come to life in *Three Bagatelles*, as two prominent political figures (Bill Clinton and Bob Dole originally, George W. Bush and John

Kerry in a restaging) are puppeteered through a political debate Banraku-style. These fantastical and absurd images help propel her political statement. Audiences see two politicians be steered and maneuvered while they at the same time are trying to gerrymander their denizens.

The postmodernism of Tiffany Mills does not look much like that of Comfort. Whereas Comfort began presenting work at a time when second generation postmodernists were moving beyond the emphasis on form and structure of first generation postmodernists, and “aesthetic cultural pluralism” (Banes, 1993, p. 308) and political fervor became the norm, Mills comes from a wholly new group of choreographers. She moved to New York in 1995 and formed a company in 2000, succeeding Comfort by eighteen years. By this time, many choreographers’ and dancers’ interests were gravitating toward a form where bodily sensation and body relationships were at the forefront. People were making more dances that attempted to display how it feels to move and how these sensations are different when one dances alone versus dancing with others. Pirkko Markulo argues that to receive a sensation from viewing art, “the observer needs to first perceive the work of art and then have feelings about it” (2006, p. 5). Release techniques and Contact Improvisation have provided avenues for dancers to explore and extend their perceptions, becoming in some ways hyper-aware of their bodies, and in turn desirous to share this awareness with audiences. Although many of Jane Comfort’s dancers come from a release technique training method, the element of theater appears more central to her products overall. Mills’ company reviews and her company mission statement suggest the root of her work lies in the exploration of space, awakening the senses, and the continuous possibility for combinations of these relationships.

Jennifer Dunning describes Mills as “the rare young choreographer who knows how to achieve her goals through movement alone” (2001). In 2001’s *Half-Hinged*, the dancers are

costumed in simple, unisex shirts and pants, and they probe at the transitions between dancing as a group and dancing in solo. The music is driving and energetic, which the movement mirrors at times and counters at others. Any movement or gesture that could serve to provide a narrative context or character development, in *this* context simply becomes a detail in the accumulation of abstract movement. By not presenting any precise setting, characters, or event, Mills sets up the audience to observe and notice the movement: five dancers move in different directions in unison, come to pause all at once, then as if being pulled by ropes, one half of their bodies bend at the knee into a deep lunge while the other foot remains firmly planted in the ground. The dancers move quickly, brushing by each other and at times taking each other on mini-rides. Although this piece has no narrative quality, the dance is not diluted movement without meaning. More correctly, it is distilled movement, wherein the movement itself, as the dancers use it in time and space, is the central focus. This characteristic of Mills' work coincides with the postmodern proclivity to reveal the "immediate, phenomenological experience" (Daly, 2002, p. 182) of dance by disclosing methods of form rather than disguising them behind dense meaning and clichéd drama. Beyond uncovering form, Mills reveals the body in such a way that it brings the audience in; a spectator feels brushes, hears the heavy breaths of hard work, and sees the dancers' weightedness.

Another work that does not offer up a strong narrative quality is *Root 30*, which comes across as one long phrase of horseplay and interplay among the dancers (Mosier, 2001). Once again the dancers are dressed ambiguously in red separates. This time the dance suggests some kind of playful interaction and the performers offer humorous movement. One downstage solo that stands out is that of a man entering alone and quietly moving to the music, as though alone or in his own home. His movement gets bigger and louder, becoming more divergent from the

movement vocabulary of the group as he appears to forget the rest of the group. He pops and jiggles until he remembers he is not alone, and turns quickly to see his cohorts in an intimate circle upstage. Mills creates relationships in how she chooses to group, separate, and partner the dancers, although it never seems necessary to define the relationships in terms of mother-daughter, lovers, or brothers, etc. Instead, it is satisfying enough to know and see that the dancers are people, and connections exist among all of them by default of their humanness and presence together. Company member Petra Van Noort shares in the company's 2007 newsletter that abstract movement takes on meaning to her when an improvisation score or sequence is repeated in relationship to a partner (Simon, 2007). This repetition allows emotions and narrative to surface naturally, so that the work can have different degrees of meaning for all those involved. This loose hold on meaning and emotion results in Mills' pieces often being viewed as exhilarating and energetically charged, but not always narrative.

In both pieces described, Mills' dancers "pull and spill like dominoes" (Mosier, 2001), constantly exciting and surprising her audience, which is perhaps part of her attempt to help them use their "kinesthetic sense to perceive the movement" (Markulo, 2006, p. 5). This kinesthetic sense, which has become such a point of interest in postmodern dance, attempts to allow audiences to bypass language so that they may feel and appreciate the craft in dance. When looking at the essential beliefs in which practices such as Contact Improvisation are grounded, one finds that organic and functional use of the body is central. Mills' work certainly exhibits an intense study into momentum and ease of movement associated with Contact Improvisation and release techniques. Finding the secrets to performing movement efficiently lessens the need for artificial techniques that require a dancer to perform impossible feats that wear down the body. Mills' work demands skill and rigor from her dancers beyond rote memorization of shapes.



Because her movement is based on the unaffected movement of the normal human body, advanced and complex choreography can be accessible to audiences. The audience can use the kinesthetic sense referred to by Markula and find beauty and power in the art of movement. Susan Sontag writes, “Transparence is the highest, most liberating value in art [...]. Transparence means experiencing the luminousness of the thing in itself. [...] What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to *see* more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more” (1994 pp. 9-10). Mills has a gift for tapping into these senses for herself, her dancers, and the audience.

From only one place of interest - the desire to embrace the unknown - postmodern dance has come to be a way to reflect people’s political stances, cultural, racial, and gender identities, as well as communicate the feelings of that which cannot be verbalized: touch, breath, speed, disorientation. Jane Comfort achieves this through her expert use of text and multiple theatrical devices. These tools help her create irony which makes audiences laugh and reflect at once. Tiffany Mills brings the spectacle of bodies moving artfully and expertly closer to audiences, using sensation to make dance art more accessible. Both women create meaningful and successful work in the postmodern genre of dance, which is increasingly difficult to define. From bare, austere formalism, to the pastiche of classicism, theater, and virtuosity, the timeline of dance postmodernism is most precisely described as a spiral, continuously expanding out. Comfort and Mills are able to exist at two different points of this spiral concurrently, pushing the possibilities in postmodern dance outward.

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Judson Church Group, or Judson Dance Theater, was comprised of a group of dancers, musicians, and visual artists who gathered at New York's Judson Church in the 1960s. This group is considered to have laid the foundations of postmodern dance. For more information, see Banes (1993), chapter twenty-five.

<sup>2</sup> Martha Graham (1894-1991) was an American choreographer and dancer whose works often took inspiration from Greek myths. Dramatic dances with epic themes characterize her career.

<sup>3</sup> Doris Humphrey (1895-1958) wrote *The Art of Making Dances*, which was published posthumously. She is considered a pioneer in classical modern dance.