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Rudy Perez: Contributions to the Postmodern Movement

“It’s bigger than life, but it’s very, very spare.” – Sasha Anawalt

Sasha Anawalt, a Los Angeles-based dance critic, used these words to describe the works of choreographer Rudy Perez for an interview in the documentary *Countdown: Reflections on a Life in Dance*. Perez, raised in the New York City neighborhood known as the “Spanish Harlem,”¹ developed to be an artist and choreographer who pushed the definitive boundaries of dance by integrating minimalistic, pedestrian, non-technical movement into his works. His famous solo, *Countdown*, is exemplary of the implementation of everyday actions into dance performance. *Countdown* illustrates the postmodern concepts of the incorporation of everyday movement, choreographic exploration of time structures, and the juxtaposition between movement and sound that were practiced at the Judson Dance Theater in New York City. This caused the piece to be controversial based on classical views of what dance is – a form of entertainment and technical proficiency – and thereby challenged contemporary dance critics to think about dance in terms of the compositional components and intention of the work, rather than the moves on their own.

Perez’s movement experimentation led him to concoct his first work at Judson Dance Theater. *Take Your Alligator (Coat) With You* (1964) was his first effort at exploring

¹ *Rudy Perez Countdown: Reflections on a Life in Dance*. Prod. Severo Perez. Filmmakers Library, 2011. *Dance Online: Dance in Video, Volume I Database*. Web.

pedestrian movement in performance.² This duet engages the use of pedestrian movement as a means of creating comedy and poking fun at *Vogue*, an iconic fashion magazine. The two dancers, “Anne and Jeff Grimaldo, made pedestrian acts—brandishing a cigarette, opening an umbrella—look forever young.”³ This piece, like others of Perez’s early works, was light and humorous.

Countdown, first performed in 1964,⁴ was, by Perez’s own admission, the first “serious” work he produced.⁵ The solo is set to two “Songs of Auvergne” and lasts a total of about seven and a half minutes.⁶ There are few accounts of early performances of this work, but original Perez company member Barbara Roan recounted her first viewing of the piece in 1967. She recounted that “Rudy was doing his cigarette piece, Countdown, which is so incredible. He [evoked] so much emotion in me with so little movement and his performance was so strong...”⁷ Perez did, in fact, work with very little movement in this work. The dancer never moves from the

² *Rudy Perez Countdown: Reflections on a Life in Dance*. Prod. Severo Perez. Filmmakers Library, 2011. *Dance Online: Dance in Video, Volume I Database*. Web.

³ Looseleaf, Victoria. “Loving the Process.” *Dance Magazine*, Jan. 2005, pp. 22-23.

⁴ “By his own accounting, it was ‘the first serious piece I did.’” “Rudy Perez: Paying Tribute to a Pioneer.” *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*: 1. Mar 19 1989. *ProQuest*. Web. 24 Oct. 2017 .

⁵ Perlmutter, Donna. “Rudy Perez: Paying Tribute to a Pioneer.” *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*: 1. Mar 19 1989. *ProQuest*. Web. 24 Oct. 2017 .

⁶ *Rudy Perez Countdown: Reflections on a Life in Dance*. Prod. Severo Perez. Filmmakers Library, 2011. *Dance Online: Dance in Video, Volume I Database*. Web.

⁷ “In about 1967, I have gone to a concert at Clark Center which doesn’t exist anymore. It used to be in an old Y9ph) on 8th Avenue and 56th Street, and I went to a concert and Rudy was doing his cigarette piece, Countdown, which is so incredible. He evokes so much emotion in me with so little movement and his performance was so strong...” *Rudy Perez Countdown: Reflections on a Life in Dance*. Prod. Severo Perez. Filmmakers Library, 2011. *Dance Online: Dance in Video, Volume I Database*. Web.

spot they begin the dance, and therefore much of the movement is with the arms performing recognizable gestures – smoking, reaching.

Countdown begins with a man sitting under a spotlight on a stool with a cigarette in his right hand. He scans the audience, brings the cigarette up to his mouth as if he were smoking, puts the cigarette down, and performs the movement sequence again. He stands in a tense stillness, looking out at the audience and then “reaches out for something with all his strength but then returns empty handed.”⁸ He picks the cigarette up once more, but does not bring it to his mouth and the lights fade.

“A visionary,” is what Alvin Ailey called Perez. Perez’s vision is what earned him a chance to perform for an expert audience at Judson Church.⁹ Judson was a springboard of new choreographic methods and collaborative concepts. It is most well-known for its “intensive exploration and expansion of possibilities for choreographic method... an intelligently analytic approach to the process of dancemaking”. Judson stood for the idea that “not only any movement or any body, but also any method is permitted.”¹⁰ Rudy Perez did not have the desired body type for modern dance. Donna Perlmutter quoted his teacher, Mary Anthony, describing him as “this young man, hardly a dancer type at all. He was stocky and had thinning hair. He wore glasses.”

⁸ McDonagh, Don. "Spirit of Dance Solo Permeates Action on Westbeth Stage." *New York Times (1923-Current file)*: 80. Nov 05 1972. *ProQuest*. Web. 24 Oct. 2017.

⁹ Ailey said he was “struck by the originality of Rudy’s ideas. He was a visionary, someone who made things happen.” Rudy Perez: Paying Tribute to a Pioneer." *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*: 1. Mar 19 1989. *ProQuest*. Web. 24 Oct. 2017.

¹⁰ Banes, Sally. “Choreographic Methods of the Judson Dance Theater.” *Writing Dancing in the Age of Postmodernism*, Wesleyan University Press/University Press of New England, Hanover and London, 1994.

She would not have predicted success for Perez had he not had such passion.¹¹ The postmodern movement brought about a shift in the accepted body types in dance, promoting dance as an art form for all.

Judson's emphasis on the choreographic method changed the focus of works from the outcome to the compositional aspects. A composition class run by Robert Dunn, who was inspired by the experimental works of musician John Cage and Cage's concept of "anything goes", instigated the formation of Judson Dance Theater.¹² One of the many compositional approaches explored in the class was identifying time structures in music scores that could be shared in dance. In classical ballet, and some forms of modern dance, the duration of a dance is, more often than not, tied to the duration of the music chosen for this piece, and the movement often reflects the changes of tempo and the insertion of lulls and staccatos in the music. Merce Cunningham, whose studio these compositional classes took place, explored these aspects of duration by creating dances without a sound score, and having one added only after the piece was finished. Dunn was very influenced by Cunningham and Cage, which resulted in him giving durational assignments that forced his students to question what time is in a piece. In her book, Sally Banes quoted Trisha Brown talking about a durational assignment that Dunn had given his class: "the ambiguity provoked days of sorting through possibilities trying to figure out what time meant, was sixty seconds the only difference between three minutes and four minutes, how

¹¹ "... He wore glasses. Ordinarily, I would not have predicted success for him as a dancer. But he had a passion, a need to make dances." Perlmutter, Donna. "Rudy Perez: Paying Tribute to a Pioneer." *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*: 1. Mar 19 1989. ProQuest. Web. 24 Oct. 2017.

¹² Banes, Sally. "Choreographic Methods of the Judson Dance Theater." *Writing Dancing in the Age of Postmodernism*, Wesleyan University Press, 2011. ProQuest. Web. 10. Dec. 2017 .

do you stop something, why, what relation does time have to movement...”¹³ These questions were all about what perception is, how it affects the creative development of movement, and how to explain the phenomenon of time when experientially it can vary so much.

Rudy Perez connected with the idea of duration and how the perception of time can be molded and shaped. Time is a factor that cannot be eradicated from a dance, only worked *with*. In his article “Rudy Perez... In Whose Hands”, dance critic Martin Last said that “Time, in Perez, is protracted in curious ways that often make the familiar minute seem open ended; a minute that can, at the same time, be both empty and crowded. Sudden and unprepared for alterations of movement and impetus within that minute disturb the focus of the viewer’s sense of time.” *Countdown* explores duration. The movement is incredibly miniscule during the first minute and a half of the work:

A man sits on a stool, head turned to the left, showing the audience a profile of his face. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, he begins to turn his head and scan the audience before him. As the man’s head moves, the process seemingly takes minutes, but once the movement is completed it feels like a brief second.

The agonizingly slow movement seeds a ball of tension in the stomach of the viewer. As the piece continues the tension only grows as the man’s hands, which have been held in a slightly crossed position, slowly begin to move apart from one another. A cigarette is in his right hand, which begins move up toward his mouth. His hand slowly takes the same pathway back down, pulling his head and torso over into a curve. The dancer carefully rolls up through his spine, and the head performs the gradual scanning motion once more followed by the cigarette-smoking

¹³ Banes, Sally. “Choreographic Methods of the Judson Dance Theater.” *Writing Dancing in the Age of Postmodernism*, Wesleyan University Press, 2011. ProQuest. Web. 10. Dec. 2017 .

motion without a cigarette, which has been placed on an ash tray. The tension-filled, slow moments are suddenly disrupted by a release of the man's head and upper spine as his left arm flies out, his hand making a stop gesture. This quick moment disrupts the viewers' stable perception of time, as well as the established flow of the dancer's movement. Disturbances such as this one force viewers to actively engage in the piece and invest in the anticipation of what could potentially be next. Additionally, the release initiates a release of breath for the audience. As the tense slowness builds that ball of apprehension in the stomach, time slows and takes the breath with it, without the audience even realizing. Having this quick moment of release jolts the audience out of its trance only to draw them right back in, as the dancer's the spine again rolls forward taking his upper body to a curved-over position.

Perez's works have been influenced by Yvonne Rainer's postmodern contribution of radical juxtaposition. Juxtaposition is the placement of two things beside one another for comparison or contrast. *Radical* juxtaposition, then, is the placement of two extremely different things – in the case of dance: ideas, sounds, movements – next to one another to create some effect. Rainer is quoted by Banes discussing her movement choices during the Judson period describing how she “dance[s] about things that affect me in a very immediate way. These things can be as diverse as the mannerisms of a friend, the facial expression of a woman hallucinating on the subway...children's play, and of course my own body impluses...”¹⁴ There are a

¹⁴ “I dance about things that affect me in a very immediate way. These things can be as diverse as the mannerisms of a friend, the facial expression of a woman hallucinating on the subway, the pleasure of an aging ballerina as she demonstrates a classical movement, a pose from an Etruscan mural, a hunchbacked man with cancer, images suggested by fairy tales, children's play, and of course my own body impulses generated in different situations.... It follows, therefore, that no single dance is about any one idea or story, but rather about a variety of things that in performance fuse together and decide the nature of the whole experience.” Banes, Sally. “Choreographic Methods of the Judson Dance Theater.” *Writing Dancing in the Age of Postmodernism*, Wesleyan University Press, 2011. ProQuest. Web. 10. Dec. 2017.

multitude of things that can fill a dance, though they neither need to be abstract nor related to contribute to the composition of a piece. The ambiguity of juxtaposition can also leave room for the interpretation by audience members. Perez utilized subtle juxtaposition in *Countdown* by choosing the beautiful, lofty, “Songs of Auvergne” to accompany the grounded, serious movement of the choreography.

“Songs of Auvergne” is a collection of folk songs originating in Auvergne, France, composed by Joseph Canteloube.¹⁵ *Countdown* is set to two of these compositions. The first is “Obal, din lou Limouzi”, followed by the more well-known “Baïlèro.” The songs are written in Auvergnat, a provincial language older than French, though it is not recognized as a language by the French government.¹⁶ “Obal, din lou Limouzi” is fast-paced and joyful. Alone, it paints a picture of a community dancing together in celebration. This sound sharply contrasts with the image created by Perez. Not only is his movement slow, but the body of the dancer is filled with visible tension, as if something powerful and painful is being held inside.

It is the second song, “Baïlèro”, that creates a very complex comparison and juxtaposition with the movement. At first listen, the piece is a smooth, airy melody of hope and longing. Canteloube claimed to have collected this song “sitting behind a rock, unseen by a shepherdess who sang out the call of this song from behind Canteloube’s position. He then observed a shepherd on a faraway peak, several hours of hiking away, who answered her very

¹⁵ Steubing, Deborah Marie. *The Setting of the Auvergnat-Dialect Folk Songs by Joseph Canteloube in His Cilants D’Auvergne: An Analysis of the Modal Aspects of the Pure Folk Songs and Canteloube’s Diatonic/Pentatonic Accompaniments*, The University of Texas at Austin, 2001, pp. 16–17.

¹⁶ “Canteloube – Chants’ d’Auvergne – Baïlèro – Renee Fleming.” *Ratiocinativa*, 3 Mar. 2013, ratiocinativa.wordpress.com/2013/03/03/canteloube-chants-dauvergne-bailero-kiri-te-kanawa/.

clearly.”¹⁷ The original intent of this sound is as a call and response between two shepherds to communicate with one another. This particular music creates an amorous tone, indicating that there is some sort of affection present in the context of the work.

When this song begins to play, about a minute and twenty seconds into the piece, the relationship between the movement and the music shifts. Juxtaposition between the music and the movement persists in glimpses, such as the previously described release of the head and upper spine, but in many ways the pieces that seemingly contradict on the surface actually work together to create an emotional narrative for the audience. This allows the audience to identify with the work and connect with the emotions that are being portrayed within it. The narrative can be distinguished after looking at the translated verses of “Baïlèro.” The translation is (there is no translation for the term baïlèro):

Shepherd, on the other side of the water,
you are not having a very good time,
call the baïlèro...

lèro lèro lèro lèro baïlèrô lô

No I am not, and you, call,
baïlèro lèrô

Lèrô, lèrô, lèrô, lèrô, baïlèrô lô!

Shepherd, the grass is in bloom,
come here to take care of your flock
call the baïlèro

lère lèro lèro· lèro baïlèrô lô!

The grass is preferable here, come over,

¹⁷ Steubing, Deborah Marie. “Chapter 3: Baïlèro.” *The Setting of the Auvergnat-Dialect Folk Songs by Joseph Canteloube in His Cilants D’Auvergne: An Analysis of the Modal Aspects of the Pure Folk Songs and Canteloube’s Diatonic/Pentatonic Accompaniments*, The University of Texas at Austin, 2001, pp. 16–17.

bailèrô lèrô
Lèro, lèro, lèro, lèro, bailèrô lô!
Shepherd, the water separates us,
and I cannot cross,
call the bailèro
lèro lèro lèro -lèro bailèrô lô!
I will descend to fetch you,
bailèro lèro
Lèro, lèro, lèro lèro bailèrô là!”¹⁸

The hopeful, amorous sense of longing that is created by the instrumental of the piece makes sense in the context of shepherds calling to each other from kilometers away, unable to reach each other. The fact that the piece is written as a conversation, then, is interesting since it is a soprano solo. It may be that this influenced Perez to create *Countdown* as a man’s solo – a work that responds to the woman’s longing voice through movement. The music and the movement combine to create their own narrative: the movement is the desperate effort of the dancer to reach his loved one, and the song is the hope of the loved one that the mover will arrive. Even though these compositions create narrative and context together, juxtaposition continues to exist. The movement conveys feelings of pain, loss, and longing, contrasting the woman’s expressions of hope, love, and longing.

Some reviews of *Countdown* perceive Perez’s use of juxtaposition and duration quite clearly. In *Dance Magazine*, Kathleen Morner points out that *Countdown* “contrasts two states of

¹⁸ Steubing, Deborah Marie. “Appendix 1: Translations - *Bailèrô*.” *The Setting of the Auvergnat-Dialect Folk Songs by Joseph Canteloube in His *Cilants D’Auvergne: An Analysis of the Modal Aspects of the Pure Folk Songs and Canteloube’s Diatonic/Pentatonic Accompaniments*, The University of Texas at Austin, 2001, pp. 115.*

mind – the wild singing of a folk singer from the Auvergne and a man’s agonized waiting – by giving them to us simultaneously and making us examine the different sense of time passing offered by each.”¹⁹ Morner seems to have clearly understood Perez’s deliberate choice to make the music and movement simultaneous, thereby challenging how the viewer perceives time in the context of the radically different movement and music.

Other critics of *Countdown* see that there is depth and deep emotion, but still emphasize the movement over the compositional aspects and intention. New York Times dance critic Don McDonagh wrote a few articles reviewing *Countdown*. In “Spirit of Dance Solo Permeates Action on Westbeth Stage,” McDonagh identifies the bodily tension as a “farewell to something or someone”, but quickly returns to a vague description of the movement and the set-up of the piece. In “Solid Dances by Rudy Perez Display Talent,” he opens his discussion of *Countdown* with another very brief description of the movement and content of the piece: “...a dance of simple reaching gestures, a few props including a cigarette and some tearlike streaks drawn down his cheeks.” Following this, McDonagh restates his interpretation of the piece as a farewell, noting that it is “even more remarkable... that the dancer never moves from the spot in which he begins.” Though McDonagh identifies an internal conflict in the piece, he mentions neither Perez’s exploration of duration nor the juxtaposition of movement and music. McDonagh’s reviews reflect the priorities of many dance critics at the time. They were watching for the emotional output of the dancer and the visual/movement-based aspects of the dance, as opposed to something below the surface or even within themselves as viewers.

Clive Barnes of the New York Times wrote a particularly harsh review titled “Dance: ‘Countdown’ by the Ailey” after *Countdown* was premiered as part of the Alvin Ailey Dance

¹⁹ Morner, Kathleen. “Rudy Perez Dance Theater.” *Dance Magazine*, November 1971, p. 41.

Theater's repertoire. Barnes employed sarcasm and exaggeration to highlight his personal distaste for the work. After falsely claiming that the piece lasts for "all of four minutes," Barnes illustrates the piece for his readers, but minimizes his account of the movement in the piece: "He smokes a cigarette. He looks very intense. He blows smoke out of his nostrils after raising the cigarette to his lips...He slowly rises from the chair, without moving his feet...the end." Barnes even goes as far as to call Perez's work a "pointless exercise." Rather than analyze *Countdown*, Barnes praises the dancer, Clive Thompson, for his "remarkable control – muscular control, and simple self-control at not revealing any anger at being involved in such bosh." Barnes does not value the processes of experimental duration and complex juxtaposition that make this piece part of an artistic revolution. He devalues the choreography because it is pared down and minimalistic. By doing so Barnes rejects Perez's ability to convey difficult and convoluted emotion through stillness, juxtaposition, and duration. Perez has created a work that can say what it needs to say to its viewers with a total of approximately 4-5 movements and beautiful, yet dissimilar pieces of music. The blindness of some critics to these bold and purposeful choices does not mar Perez's creative, experimental endeavors.

Perez responds to the reception of his works by dance critics by saying that they are not looking deeply into the piece, but that they are merely judging the structure. He uses an analogy of an ice cream sundae, describing that "The inside of the work is me, and the outside is like trying to decide whether you want butterscotch syrup or chocolate fudge. Maybe I should try to do works without the outside so that they can see what really matters, the inside."²⁰ It is easy to judge a piece by its movement content. It is far more difficult to analyze what that piece is saying

²⁰ Last, Martin. "Rudy Perez... In Whose Hands." *Dance Magazine*, June 1971, p. 30.

based on the movement content, intention, and the process of its creation. When Perez talks about doing works without the outside, he means that he should create work that pulls critics and viewers by their bootstraps into the process and meaning of the piece. Martin Last wrote a feature on Perez for *Dance Magazine* where he said, “the message’s medium, when it’s structured by Rudy Perez, is likely to convey messages of seeing, growing, doing, knowing.” This is the surface of the inside, the understanding of Perez’s messages. That is where Perez pushes critics the most. Critics cannot do a complete job of reviewing a Perez work by looking just at the movement, staging, and sound. Requiring critics to look deeply at his works also pushes them to review other artists works in the same way. A review should be a representation of the emotional investment of the choreographer and dancers, the context created by a piece, and the compositional process that led to the piece.

Marcia Siegel once wrote that Rudy Perez is “... one of the quiet experimenters in whose hands I think the future of dance will rest.”²¹ His exploration of duration and stillness, the juxtaposition of sound and movement, and his use of common actions contributed to the forward progress of the postmodern movement in New York. When Perez moved to Los Angeles, he brought these ideas with him, and grew the experimental dance scene on the west coast. “It was Perez who helped usher in Post-Modernism with his starkly intense epics of the soul, his spiritually exhausting traversals of the odd man out.”²² *Countdown* is one of those iconic epics of the soul, and a work that spurred Perez on to be one of the most iconic and influential choreographers of the western postmodern movement.

²¹ Last, Martin. “Rudy Perez... In Whose Hands.” *Dance Magazine*, June 1971, p. 75.

²² Perlmutter, Donna. "Rudy Perez: Paying Tribute to a Pioneer." *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*: 1. Mar 19 1989. *ProQuest*. Web. 24 Oct. 2017.

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