

Twyla Tharp

Convergence of Technique and Style

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Abstract

What I aim to explore is how Twyla Tharp used technique and style interchangeably, merging the concept of process and product so that they were both unrecognizable during the creative phase of choreography. In addition, I wish to examine how what emerged from her creative form of movement exploration was a technique that did not stand alone such as Graham, Limon and Cunningham. Instead, it developed into a technique that is interdependent of all dance techniques threading its way horizontally and making its mark on all forms of dance.

In 1988 I had the distinct pleasure of working with one of the pioneers of the post-modern dance era – Twyla Tharp. In my case, I guess one might say that “ignorance is bliss” due to the fact that I hadn’t a clue as to who Twyla Tharp was which was probably a good thing because the intimidation factor of being in her presence was nonexistent for me.

After a cattle call at the ABT studios at 890 Broadway in which I wore a blue auto mechanic’s jumpsuit and tattered sneakers, I was invited to work with Twyla in the studio a few days a week. Upon arriving, Twyla was there alone and sweaty (most likely because she was probably there for about two hours dancing before my arrival) and had asked me if I had class. I told her I had not and she told me to warm up in which I did. As I warmed up I observed what she was doing – she was, how I termed at the time, “messing around” to the music. She had some music on and was dancing to it the way I would do in my bedroom or in a club – she was free styling. Later I was to learn that the technical term for what Twyla was doing was called improvising.

After my warm-up, she asked me to stand up and work with her. In silence, she began to move with whatever music she played and my objective was to follow

her. After many days of meeting with her this process began to change – instead of just following her, I began to assimilate her. It wasn't just about following her every move but every breath, weight shift, shuffle and plie to the point where I was anticipating what she was going to do next and sometimes be slightly ahead of her thought and if she liked it, we used it. We worked this way for months until the company came back from South America in which I was officially hired on as a member of the company.

What I experienced from her creative process, after much has been stripped away, was that what was left was the way in which she used her feet and plie. Versatile feet and dynamic plie are the hallmarks of Tharp's technique and if you watch her pieces performed by her company members, the way she uses her feet is foundational of not only her style but the way in which her movement transitions seamlessly from one to the other. So with this known, why isn't there a Tharp Technique? Why has Twyla chosen not to take the path of dance pioneers such as Merce Cunningham, Martha Graham, Jose Limon and others, to codify her style essentially immortalizing her legacy?

At twelve years of age Twyla's days were packed and consisted of an eclectic array of activities which became the foundation of how she approached her life. At twelve her days consisted of activities such as violin lessons, baton, tap and ballet. When Twyla was as young as eight she was "mystified" as to the way "...kids could play together, simply inventing their days as they went along, not knowing each morning exactly how the day would unfold."¹ When Twyla moved to New York City and began taking ballet classes she realized that with her eclectic training she, "...had not received the firm grounding required for a classical technique."² Soon, Twyla began to ask questions such as, "How could one become a classical dancer while at the same time asking what it means to move outside the regulation forms" and "Is this how I should be dancing?"³ Twyla knew that in order to be a classical dancer demanded an "unquestioned technique."⁴ It was these questions that led her to her decision to expose herself to all forms of dance. During this time, Twyla would study with many choreographers including Jerome Robbins, Erick Hawkins, Alvin Ailey and Anna Sokolow to name a few. However the two choreographers that left a lasting impression with her were Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham.

¹ *Push Comes to Shove* p.31

² *Push Comes to Shove* p. 48

³ *ibid* p. 49

⁴ *ibid* p. 49

Taking classes at the Graham studio, in the presence of Martha and her dancers and experiencing the accompaniment of Cameron McCosh, was an honor for Twyla but not enough to keep her there. Twyla loved the aesthetic of dancing in the Graham Studios. She admired the dedication of Martha's dancers and Martha herself. Graham was in her sixties and teaching and Twyla admired how Graham took off her ballet slippers before entering the class and how Martha's feet were worse than her own.⁵ However, Twyla could not commit herself because Martha required her dancers to "play roles" which involved an element of "pretend" with which she was uncomfortable.⁶

Merce Cunningham, on the other hand, was "...unconcerned with mythologies" and created an "idiom offering much greater rhythmic sophistication than Martha's." Merce taught a classical style of dance but the dancers danced in the center, unsupported by the barre. Merce also focused on three areas of the back: the upper, middle and lower. Altogether, Twyla believed this made for "light, fast dance." However, Merce's use of the "I Ching" to make decisions for him and his

⁵ *Push Comes to Shove* p.50-51

⁶ *Ibid* p.52

collaboration with John Cage perpetuated an aesthetic of chance that Twyla had no sympathy for.⁷

Twyla's tenure with Paul Taylor was short lived. Although she believed that Paul Taylor was, "simply the most gorgeous creature imaginable," during the creation of *Party Mix* she found that Paul was, "entering the realm of theatrics and make-believe" Twyla felt both "abandoned and embarrassed."⁸ On the other hand, during this time, Twyla began to develop a dancer's pedagogy for rehearsing. In one of Paul's rehearsals she remembers sitting with her knees pulled up to her chin, observing him and "absorbing his movement."⁹ In addition, Twyla makes this realization:

*"I realized that in making a new work there is no use for language. In these moments, those who dance must watch and learn silently."*¹⁰

Working with Twyla, one of the memories that stood out for me was the silence – without saying a word, she demanded it. After a few weeks I realized that working

⁷ *Push Comes to Shove* p. 52-53

⁸ *Ibid* p. 69

⁹ *Push Comes to Shove* p. 64

this way was both clear and without ambiguity. The body does not lie and all I had to do was to do what Twyla's body was inviting me to do – it was simple and true. This was Twyla's pedagogy for what she expected of her dancers when learning new movement. Elaine Kudo described this process in this way:

*"A lot of time she just kind of bops around to music. The choreography becomes more detailed. She doesn't really talk much but you follow and you pick up as many details as you can...she wants to see how much the dancers can pick up quickly, because it is important to her that they have that kind of eye."*¹¹

Unfortunately, if you were a dancer who wanted to take a Tharp class, you were out of luck.

Tharp Technique, such as Graham and Limon techniques, is nowhere to be found today making it one of the more curious aspects about Twyla. Twyla's style consists of an intimate relationship with music, strong technique, and a vast movement vocabulary of dance styles. To form this into a technique class would be a monumental task in addition, will it be the same? When a style becomes a technique, it becomes a product. Twyla learned this lesson from her past. I posed this question to her and this is how I prefaced it:

I have this thing about teaching – after sometime teaching the same thing over and over again, I grow bored. I have a feeling that what happens is that it all becomes product and

¹¹ <http://lovedancemore.org/2012/01/29/exclusive-interview-with-ballet-master-elaine-kudo/>

the process becomes non-existent. In the Bboy world, the process is the product – the Bboy is learning and creating and producing at the same time. When I worked with you it was the same. You didn't teach a ballet class and then create a phrase constrained by the boundaries of the art form – you put on music and responded to it and required me to assimilate your breath, weight, rhythm and energy – the process was the product. In addition, there was a sense of Creolism in your way of working – you were open to new movement ideas from your dancers. I feel this way of teaching makes more sense than anything in the world.

Alright, now to the question: Did you chose to not create a codified technique such as the Graham Technique and Limon because of a sense that dance should be an ever evolving art form and that there should not be a delineation between process and product?

This was her answer:

Dear Danny - all your observations are spot on. Process is/is not product and everyone has something to offer. I think we would agree, you and I, that's it in a nut shell. Congratulations on your accomplishments. I'm very proud of you. All the best Twyla

In looking at how Twyla dealt with this conundrum, it all became very clear –

Because of Twyla's vast exposure to music and dance, she can choreograph on any company. This cannot be said for Graham, Limon and even Taylor. I don't think any of them has ever walked into the studio of a major ballet company and choreographed a piece from scratch – Twyla has. This means that the foundations of her style, the use of feet, plie' and music transcends on a horizontal plane, merging with the techniques of companies she choreographs on and essentially enhancing the technique of the dancer. Why codify a style and live in a static world when you could continue to evolve your style and technique by converging it with the esthetics of a completely different company. It's like a human science experiment and the

result is an evolved form of dance. I shared this revelation with Sara Rudner, one of the founding members of Twyla's company:

It all began with my experience as a Bboy. In examining how I learned movement then, we didn't take a class, we learned from each other coming up with new moves and performing them in front of each other then we took it to the streets. Today Bboying has evolved to heights that was never conceived possible in my day while modern dance continues to be restricted by the techniques created by the masters of the past. Twyla on the other hand chose a different path: she chose to be against codification. As a result, her process became the product of her creation the same as the Bboy - I emailed Twyla on this and she agreed. But one thing dawned on me; although there is not a codified Tharp technique, the foundations of her way of moving - her way of using the feet and plie to define and redefine the vertical plane (in a sense, being in the air and on the ground at the same time) in addition to utilizing its use in transitioning from one movement to another, she has created a form that transcends horizontally between all dance pedagogy...that is really, really cool.

This was her response:

It is a delight to hear from you, and to read your reflections on Twyla's art and practice. You are taking the work to the next level, keep going!!!!

Still not satisfied, I went to Shelley Washington and asked her directly:

Why hasn't anyone codified Tharp's style if not for legacy, then for the purpose of teaching dance companies to perform her works with integrity?

This was Shelley's response:

what a good question. honestly danny the only way to codify the technique would be from twyla and she hasn't done it yet. i know after i staged the golden section twyla went to the ailey company and gave them a class. hubbard street danced twyla's rep beautifully in the 90's. they did 6 of her works and then she choreographed a piece for them. they started with the fugue and then sue's leg before doing baker's dozen, sinatra, the golden section and fait accompli. there was a definite order in which they learned the work, there was so much more time to stage the ballets back then and the company was very strong. they also worked with rose, jenny, tom and then mostly with me. they also performed the works for years and toured with them.

now companies are so pinched for \$\$\$\$\$\$ the works are being taught quickly and then only performed a few times. the dancers have no way of exploring the depth of twyla tharp. nor is their money or time to teach them classes while staging the work. i agree

with you on your points. we were all very blessed to have each other and twyla to add
give the magic we created.

say hello to jeff and feel free to continue this discussion.

with love,

shelley xxxooo

Twyla definitely planned her path and although she respected the modern and post-modern pioneers, it is clear that she did not agree with some of their methods and ideologies. When Yvonne Rainer wrote her famous *No Manifesto*, Twyla responded with, “All of those nos would become my yeses.”¹² As for her legacy, instead of being a follower, she chose to lead - she said no to codification (at least as of yet) and yes to convergence. What a better way to pass a legacy on through embedding a signature within many techniques and watch it evolve into something you never thought possible.

References

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¹² *Push Comes to Shove* p. 88-89

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