

Bone-deep pleasure

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Wendy Perron *THROUGH THE EYES OF A DANCER* Selected writings 344pp. Wesleyan University Press. \$29.95.

978 0 8195 7407 7 Wendy Perron's introduction to her compendium of reviews and feature articles reads not unlike an ancient apologia with its curious mix of hubris and diffidence.

She seems at pains, as a practitioner of dance, to legitimize or excuse her assumption of the writer's, and especially the critic's, mantle.

Her opening sentence is nothing if not preemptive: "I was not the writer in the family". It is also unnecessary; there is no question but that she can write, that she is, by intuition and by formal as well as impromptu training, a writer. Indeed, her style is refreshingly different from the lifeless, obfuscating prose that characterizes so much dance writing and that makes modern dance in particular seem to the reader an arcane and alienating experience. Her sense of rhythm, musicality and logic inform and illuminate her criticism, as does her performer's instinct for intimate, immediate communication with an audience.

It is notoriously difficult to describe adequately or meaningfully in words what a dance looks like. It is not only a physical medium of expression, but also of experience. Perron is particularly adept at distilling the essence of a moment. Even when her prose is most precise and evocative, I found it difficult to formulate a vision of the beautiful movements, the eloquent stillnesses Perron documents. What I did learn, however, was what it felt like to be there, in that moment, breathing the same air as the dancers on stage and the audience in their darkened seats. We can appreciate the visceral charge, the elemental excitement generated by a single potent gesture or a perfect piece of somatic phrasing, even if we can't picture it, or our picture remains impressionistic at best. In trying to analyse the mystery of Sara Rudner's astounding dancing, Perron says: Every ounce of her body commits to the movement; all systems are go; she is doing what she was meant to do. Even the most pedestrian of moves are charged. . . . Although her presence is rock solid, her movements are mercurial. Like a great actress, she transforms with every feeling, every phrase. But the spell she casts is not theatrical.

It is a pure dance spell, rooted in bone-deep pleasure of motion and a lusty willingness to follow her own impulses.

She is a fine portraitist. Some of her most engaging pieces are not about movement as such but simply about people she has worked with or befriended. The most interesting, perceptive piece of writing in *Through the Eyes of a Dancer* is perhaps about a writer, albeit one who had a special place in his heart for dancers, "a place of innocence": J. D. Salinger.

Perron is a principled critic and editor, acutely aware of her responsibility to an art form that is eternally precarious in economic terms, and of the social issues alongside which, and out of which, dance is created. The volume includes two pieces - "Beware the Egos of Critics" (1991) and "A Debate on Snark" (2012) - admonishing critics who abuse the power they wield or who indulge in excessive negativity under the protective veil of honesty. Her own reviews could perhaps

use more critical bite, but, while her sympathies are clearly with the makers of dance, her point of view is more balanced, her points of reference wider than the average practitioner's or critic's.

The book is divided into seven chronological sections spanning the 1960s to 2012. It is not intended to be a comprehensive record of Perron's writings for the SoHo Weekly News, Village Voice and Dance Magazine (of which she is currently Editor at large), or of the New York dance scene in the past half century. Instead, the selection is partly defined by Perron's parallel careers as dancer, choreographer and teacher: busy periods practising her craft entailed fallow periods of writing about it, and vice versa. The selection is idiosyncratic in other ways, too. Things that excite Perron as a dancer, or that underpin her philosophy as an artist, inevitably emerge as leitmotifs in her writing; for instance, her emphasis on dance (or acting) as a serious, vital and revelatory form of play, as a sophisticated extension of the game of Let's Pretend. Her critical responses are both raw and elegant, betraying the influence of her heroine Susan Sontag, who believed in lingering over the "sensuous surface" of art.

Each piece is like the twist of a kaleidoscope, colourful fragments of downtown experimental performances, ballet at the Metropolitan and butoh in Brooklyn, testifying to the richness of New York's dance culture. Beyond the descriptive and documentary lie discussions of a more ethical nature: ongoing debates about feminism and racial diversity in dance; sober reminders of how the AIDS epidemic decimated the dance world in the 1980s and 90s; and cautionary tales of how the new technology and the sheer availability of readymades from the dance past complicate (and arguably enrich) the question of appropriation. And there are two controversial blogs about the uncredited use of a body double in the film *Black Swan* (2010).

Through the Eyes of a Dancer is an apt title. Even the pieces not specifically concerned with dance are written from a dancer's perspective. When Perron interviews Sontag, she notes her "gently moving hands" and how her "lifeaffirming energy radiates throughout her body and the space around her". Some of her more striking images have a danceability and a soaring quality, as in "when sparks of possibility flew across the skyscape of the American mind". "Dancers see a netherworld of thought, motion and energy invisible to non-dancers", Perron explains. This is dance as *modus vivendi* as much as *modus videndi*.