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“Retracing Steps”: An Interview with Choreographer and Artist Tanya Voges

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“Retracing Steps”: An Interview with Choreographer and Artist Tanya Voges

Tanya Voges is an Australian-based choreographer and dance artist. Over the past five years, Tanya has developed a number of interactive dance works inspired by concepts, and the experience, of human memory. Kate Stevens was invited to advise on memory theories and research from a cognitive science perspective during Tanya’s residency at Critical Path in Sydney in 2014. James Leach was introduced to Tanya’s work, in Kate’s company, during a collaborative research lab., also at Critical Path, in 2015. Concepts we discussed included verbatim theatre, ethics and memory research, childhood amnesia, relationships between memory, language development, a sense of self, individual differences, practicing remembering, episodic and autobiographical memory, procedural memory, implicit knowledge, the cognitive neuroscience of memory, and the social and relational elicitation of memory through movement. This interview was recorded via skype in June 2015. Tanya continues to develop ideas of memory and the personal in interactive experiences for audiences in current work such as “Admit One”.

A captivating aspect of Tanya’s practice is her concern with making the audience part of the performance. She does this, in part, by establishing a relationship with the audience, and among the audience through the medium of eliciting past memories. Her experiments have two aspects in this regard. Firstly, Tanya is interested in establishing a sense of a personal connection between herself as performer, and audience members. Secondly, facilitated by this rapidly achieved but potentially intimately felt connection, there is an opportunity for audience members to ‘move through’ memory spaces and experience memory through movements. Her idea of extended bodies in space highlights aspects of the extension of persons through memories, to other people, and other spaces of experience. Memory is complexly social here, with spatial memory elicited by a specific way of establishing context for experience. The dual approach: of establishing a ‘relationship’ with and among audiences, and the subsequent experience of space and memory, is central.

CS: Tanya thank you for your time to do this and for us to capture some of the ideas around your work. Would you say a little bit about the medium for your artistic practice and describe some of the different types of performance that you have worked with?

TV: I'm a choreographer mainly. I've worked in dance since I was very young and my main job has been as a dancer for other choreographers, where we work with contemporary dance and devise performance practices. I'm really interested in how we can engage audiences in a more interactive way so that they can sense movement in their own bodies as well as their own thoughts and memories that are connected to the subject matter of the performance. And to do that, a little bit more of an extension of the body, I've been working with various mediums like projection work, and collaborating with visual artists to bring a more kinaesthetic sense, outside of the body. I've worked mostly in solo performance, so I've choreographed and danced in the performance itself and, to help to get my message across more clearly in dance, I've also used text. Just as in theatre where a script might be derived from a real life story, I use the words of audience members inside the performance as a verbatim text.

I have a studio-based choreographic platform. The research elements in thoughts and ideas, and background research into memory, are things that I bring as reading materials into the studio. I try to find that embodiment of ideas through my choreography. The creative process I find is long, it's time intensive in the studio, and then there are long periods of time away from the studio to reflect and explore other ideas. Collaboration with other artists has been valuable for me in the creative process. I have a very visual way of thinking about choreographic outcomes and a visual way of thinking about the staging of dance performances. Collaborating with visual artists has definitely helped me, and working with multimedia artists and experts in that field has meant that I can realise some ideas that I didn't know were possible. In the most recent incarnation of "Retracing Steps", I worked with visual artist, Kellie O'Dempsey. She works with both physical markings, drawing on the floor, paper or wall, and a very technical element of drawing using a stylus on an iPad that is then projected. It's mediated through "Tagtools" that was created by graffiti artists to leave impermanent traces of their work for projection. Obviously, as you know, graffiti is done under cover of night and no-one can see when it's produced and then it's left there in the morning without the artist being present. But in the way that we use it, it's creating a mark or a trace of light in an immediate way that the audience members can see it, drawn into the

space. And then it's – just like dance, it's ephemeral, it disappears, it's not there anymore. It's left in the memory of the audience who saw it. I've worked with Mic Gruchy, who is a media specialist who has worked in multimedia, video art and performance since the 1970s and has seen the evolution of lots of different types of technology. That was incredibly informative for me, to be able to realise some of my ideas about having live and recorded video to get people into the space, to understand the performance space in. I've worked with dramaturg, Martyn Coutts who, from a dance perspective, represents what the audience will see and may question my motives for including a movement or even the multimedia element. Questioning helps me step outside of the creative process and reflect.

That's about my creative focus. I write a lot as well. Just writing about my ideas, in a very-note-taking kind of way, list-making and sometimes also quite poetic. I like to use words in a way that jogs my creativity from a movement perspective, so I don't exclusively work with just the body to create choreography. It's a mix of all of those things and taking in pop culture and what's current at the moment. They're all the sorts of ways that I work choreographically.

CS: Would you describe your initial ideas for the work that you and I were involved with and, in particular, the role of memory?

TV: Over the past five years, I've been working on a suite of works under the name "Retracing Steps". It started as an exploration of my own past to create a solo work. As a dancer, I'm often mining my own movement history and presenting that in a very personal way but wanting to draw the audience's personal history into the performance as well. I asked myself the question: how many different ways could I have an audience interact with me in the performance without making anyone stand up and volunteer and dance? The process working with memory started right back at thinking of one's earliest memory. Initially, I had the idea that I'd incrementally go through different stages of someone's life, but the richness that comes in exploring earliest memories was just so intriguing to me. I got hooked into that point for quite a while. Even before I involved you in this most recent research project together with a lot of other artists as advisors and collaborators, I had looked at what were my earliest

memories and by doing that I created a language of physical movement and dance. We call this choreographic scores or choreographic phrases. And the phrases were more fixed movements that I would repeat every time I'd do the performances but the choreographic scores were a list of instructions that would elicit a response from me physically based on these memories. Kind of like a jazz musician having the range of notes or the range of musical sounds that they could draw on and then mixing it up when it's in performance, so that there's always variation from one performance to another. I guess it used my memory in a current, instantaneous way as well, while reflecting on these really early memories.

What I found from the audience's experiences was that when I asked them if I could record their response to questions about their earliest memory, I gathered a heap of data that was voice recorded. I'd cut my own question out, "What is your earliest memory?", but I'd record the audience member one-on-one, answering me. Through that, I noticed that people had three different ways of referring to their earliest memory. They'd say "Oh, I was probably about 3 or 4", so it was age related or they'd start by saying "it's connected to a photo, there's a photo on the mantelpiece or it's in the photo album" or with younger people, younger audience members, they'd say "there's a video of it and we'd watched it many times". And people *feel* – and this might be because they were coming to a dance performance, so they were people who were very interested in movement practices or perhaps they're let's say sensitive people because they were sensitive to the arts and interested in this collaborative art form with which I was working. There were often people who would say "Oh, my earliest memory is just a feeling, I don't know if that counts". And they were the ones that were really interesting to me because that in a way is what I have as my earliest memory as well and that's how I can most accurately bring forth choreographic movement from the recollection of a memory, this feeling, this kinaesthetic response.

And I think there's still that same question, my initial ideas for the work and the role of memory is that in the dance studio when I'm working with other dancers, whether I'm being a dancer or a choreographer, we start off with a discussion about pain and physical capabilities. We're very judgmental about what our bodies can and can't do.

CS: Did you say pain?

TV: Pain, yes. The beginning of a dancer's day is to overcome any pain or injury that you're carrying with you and then do a warm up as a group to open the body to different movement practices before you get into the creative responses that you make with choreography. It's just an interest point that I've had when I've invited other dancers to work with me. We look at parts of our body where we hold the most tension or pain or where we feel the most limitation to achieving set dance movements that we've learnt in our careers, whether it's, you know, at university in the dance courses or in our ballet classes in the past and we often talk about whether that's an emotional residue in that painful site. Maybe something happened in our past and it was – when we were hunched forward and it's an emotional space and perhaps that's where we hold that point. So I tried to mine my body and its physical responses in relation to this memory of parts that might be residual, like habitual movement, even before I'm dancing... If I'm walking slightly lopsided, is the reason my foot turns out because that hip has always had this injury from the past. Where is the body memory and how can we make an enquiry about that?

CS: In the work that we're talking about in particular or the series of works, what are some of the most striking, even surprising, things that came from the performances?

TV: What I found really intriguing was that the things that I thought would happen were pretty consistent. It didn't matter whether I was performing in Sydney, in a smaller state with a different type of population, like Canberra, or when I went to New York and performed there. It led to similar responses within the performance, so that I had a model of choreography and a sequence of events for me to perform because the audience gave me the same kind of data. As well as the earliest memory question that I asked everyone, as I said before, people would come back with either a story about their earliest memories from a photo, a feeling or something that happened when they were about the age of three. I tried to work on another spatial memory which we'd worked out as the age of 12, we thought of that as being a

passageway into the next step out of childhood and into pre-adult life. And it was videoed as well, so it's quite memorable for many people, whether it's because you've got that circumstance, that coming of age, but it was something that the audiences could relate to. And instead of spatial relationships, which I think a lot of dance is about, how do I get an audience member, when they're sitting in a seat watching a dance performance, to experience the sense of space within their memory. Instead, we had the audience all standing in the same space as the performers and they would walk through their imagined home from where they lived at age 12. What was really amazing was that this was a joyful, playful experience for audiences – audiences from different age groups, audiences from different locations around Australia and from New York. It was an enjoyable thing – although I didn't invite the audience members to talk to one another, because they'd had the experience of speaking to me before entering the space, and then the experience that everyone was living in their memories and reliving walking through rooms and being guided as I asked them to explore where they slept or did they have a bedroom that they shared with a sibling, or where was their dining room, and all of these things, contributed to people walking around and suddenly just talking to one another and having a laugh and "Oh, you're standing in my bedroom while I'm standing in the kitchen", or something like that. That was surprising and it became a very playful thing. I thought, if this wasn't actually structured well this could a) go on forever or b), go into a place where you couldn't rein people back into sitting down and watching the performance. The other surprising thing was that when I left people where they were in the space to watch the performance, it would happen in very close proximity to them. So it was different from a traditional dance performance where the audience member would be separated by the "fourth wall"; there wasn't that structure.

People were quite happy to just sit on the floor or stand and observe. I always had some chairs available for people with mobility issues or who were just too shy to have taken their shoes off and sit on the ground. But it was really a communal experience.

And I mention the experiment where I did this in New York. What I wanted to find was an event that anyone I questioned could have an experience of, even though they weren't there,

and looking at my life and my generation and some of them possibly coming to the theatre to experience this the performance. I chose September 11 as an event to ask people about. So that was another question that I'd ask and gather audience data on. What was their experience of September 11, where were they in the world, how old were they at the time that it happened. By asking those questions and then later, having done some research and finding out that this is what is known as a collective memory and a collective memory is also referred to as flashbulb memory, is that right?

CS: The flashbulb is of the moment, collective when the knowledge is distributed around a group of people.

TV: By having that connection to such a big world event that we can all reflect on, that's been heavily covered in the media, it's not something that many people would have been isolated from hearing about. And people were really able to drop into how old they were when it happened and what they'd felt at the time. I thought that was really interesting.

Surprisingly, when I was in New York, most of the people that I spoke to, either weren't from New York or weren't in New York at the time it happened. Obviously, there were people for whom it was a very emotional point to discuss. The audience observed - bits of data that I used from that questioning through the performance, in the performance. Even if I didn't repeat their answer to the audience, or use the response in a choreographic way, even if I used just two responses from audience members, everyone knew what questions had been asked and they could further reflect on their own experience by seeing someone else's experience reiterated on stage in a different mode, whether it was through talking about it or through movement. The way that I used their recorded data was that I would record it on an iPhone as a voice memo. In the performance, I had a set of headphones that were Bluetooth connected to the phone so that I didn't have to be holding up the phone while dancing, but the headphones I wore were visible. I would replay those recordings and as I heard them I would speak those words. For a lot of the time, I wasn't completely conscious of what would come next, but that's when I would employ either the choreographic phrases where I'd be

doing known dance movement - and instead of performing it to music, I was performing it at the same time as speaking the words of the audience. That was a random selection, a random process to select which audience response I would use, so as to not overly control that outcome.

Because audience response to the works was so positive, I want to continue to explore this mode of working. It does seem to draw people into the experience a lot more by knowing that someone else in the room, who they are watching the performance with, has actually just answered those questions.

CS: Are there other things about the actual performances that you'd like to touch on?

TV: Just to touch on this last reiteration at Critical Path. During 2014, I had my residency at Critical Path, which is a space in Sydney for New South Wales-based choreographers to research and develop their choreographic practice. During that research and development period, I had the opportunity to work with you and visual artist, Kellie O'Dempsey, dramaturg, Martyn Coutts and media specialist, Mic Gruchy. Placing myself in a position with these other experts, gave me different ways of looking at the performance making and different ways to see which directions the performance could go. I already had so many consistent things that were happening, I wanted to be able to create a system that would enable taking the performance to different locations, taking it to different sites, whether it was indoors or outdoors. I started to play with the idea of vestiges as the work that we played with in Critical Path in this last incarnation of "Retracing Steps", because it had a lot more components. It had the mediation of live and recorded projections that was explored, that it hadn't had prior to that, and it had Kellie as a visual artist interacting, both as a performer and doing performance drawing.

The things that started to come to the fore were memories, using the way that the body could trace movement through the space and illustrating that with performance drawing. There was a very strong connection and I remember you making a point about the memory trace being

visible. Some of the movements and actions that I was going through were like a path of evolution or the path of going from early life through growing old and maybe even reflecting on death and that our memories at a very cellular level, are connected to movement practices, even though whenever I think of memory, it seems to go back into the mind space, the body memory is more powerful than this memory of sitting and thinking about it and just talking about it.

One other thing, yet to be fully explored from my point of view as a choreographic practice, is to read the work of a scientist or thinkers and see what else bursts out of other art forms and see how that connects to where this work could go in the future.

CS: Science, by the sound of it, has informed your artistic practice and works?

TV: Yes. Definitely in the sense of cognitive research, what is documented seems to substantiate what I've found in my creative process. My choreographic work is not an extensive exploration of those concepts, but they are supported and that makes me more confident in involving audience members in the performance process, and that I'm not just making it up. That there is scientific backing for the reasons that I'm connected to my own memories and the reasons that I think others would be interested in reflecting on their memories, their childhood experiences, their experiences that are common within the community, arriving to have an experience together. In a way, it's creating this new experiential memory within the group of people who participate in the work. I have worked in a few other ways to reflect on how the choreographic research can be substantiated and I've worked within another process at South Australian Museum to create a dance piece as part of the Waterhouse Natural Science Art Prize. I was invited to create a dance piece for opening night, drawing on the natural sciences, looking at fossils and early movement, and connecting those ideas to create dance works. And I've also worked with a group of elderly people in a care facility who had dementia and we worked with them in a dance and music program over an 18 week period. There wasn't a performance outcome, rather it was an experiential process for the participant. There was a lot of enjoyment and it helped me reflect on my work towards memory in people

whose memory is fading and quite specifically for people with dementia, that they look back to certain periods of their life and perhaps bringing them back to times that, from their early 20s or when they had significant moments in their life, like when they were married or when they met the person that they were going to live with for their life or when they had their first job. And we heard stories that they would repeat over and over again and on first meeting them, I wouldn't have thought that there was anything amiss. They could maintain a conversation in a social situation, but then knowing that – as I saw them three times a week or two times a week over an 18 week period, they were just repeating the same stories and that they'd really held onto a few moments in their life and perhaps because they knew it was socially acceptable to talk about that element of their life, that story was repeated. But the way that they opened up and the enjoyment that they had through these very simple dance classes and music appreciation sessions that was incredible to me. I don't know that I will necessarily create a dance work from that, but the chance to be part of a research project into the wellbeing of patients with dementia has definitely influenced my approach to looking at memory and at audience participation.

CS: It's all influencing, isn't it? In the works I know of yours, you've made explicit what I think is so much of an influence on artworks anyway. Memory is at the heart of much visual and performing art and you've brought it into relief.

TV: When we articulate as artists, which we have to do many times, whether it's for a tag line to get people to come to the show or just as simple as describing it to other people, everyone's past experience is going to influence their experience of your art. They're going to look through the window of their own experience. I was intrigued by my own memories. It was a good question that I was asked by another artist, do I have a strong memory of my past, have I got a good memory? I think I do have a good memory and I don't know why that feels like it's important to the process, but I am really interested in people who tell me they don't have a good memory of the past and they maybe have blocked out those things that they don't want to remember. I know that you've made a good point that it might be adaptive that there are things that we do forget. It's there for our safety, our mental capacity. If we remembered

everything that happened to us, we wouldn't have time to be in the present moment, our brains would be over loaded. But it's a given that art is viewed through one's own experiences.

I also didn't want to pressure people into experiencing something that was scary or foreign or had to be questioned further when they left the performance. Contemporary dance is such an abstract form, but to have people leave a performance and go "I wonder what that was about? What does that have to do with me and my life? Why did the dancer roll around on the floor all the time?" I don't want people to be left so much with that question that they then didn't get the point of the performance and this is a way that I think speaks to my sensibilities and interest in community and communal experiences, that, you know, we are so separated from one another, the whole experience of social media, you're networked and connected to people, but actually isolated in your own home or in an office situation where you're not able to have face to face time with other people who are part of your plan or part of your community. But this experience allows for that very primal response of doing something with a group of people and what impression it leaves on you after that.

CS: And inclusive, because everyone brought something and that was more than enough. It was the work. It's inclusive, liberating.

TV: I do like that word "inclusive" and I think having worked with people with disabilities, we use the word as inclusive arts and inclusive performance making to include people of all different embodiments. So there's the trained dancer and there's the untrained dancer, but sometimes they work together in a performance space, but there is still a separation between them and the audience, whereas we'll have a fully participatory work that the audience can be involved in, then I think we've really made the pieces inclusive with everyone involved.

I think the beauty in watching dance and watching a skilled, trained dancer is the innate kinaesthetic response that we have, so I can be sitting in my seat and watch a brilliant male ballet dancer take three running steps and then a huge beautiful leap that seems absolutely

impossible, and it gives you a sense of thrill to watch from sitting in your seat and you see that over and over again with videos that go viral of maybe a young, little kid walking down the street who, all of a sudden, is filmed busting a couple of moves that makes you go “How is that possible? I couldn’t even do that”. And they’re a little kid. You have that response, but I think there’s got to be a way that we can experience movement for ourselves and a lot of people would be too scared to go to the gym and try to achieve that sense of fitness that could then allow them to do some of these impossible moves. And other people would be too scared to go to a dance performance to watch what happens on stage, just in case they don’t get it. But by simply tapping into this element of memory that’s connected to a spatial relationship to memory, it was incredible how people would just move through space and then feel a little bit that they had contributed to what’s going on in the performance without having to do any dance steps. They never knew that they had – that the audience can perhaps dance too. That was interesting too because it kept the dialogue going after the performance.

On a number of occasions when I’ve presented this work, we’ve created a post-performance forum for discussion. But even when that wasn’t set up as a part of the process, speaking to people in the foyer-post performance, mainly because they’d felt they were involved in the experience, or they felt like something had happened to them that they’d also connected to, they seemed compelled to come to me afterwards and tell me about their experience and most of the time it was just that it had triggered something that they hadn’t thought of for a long time that was pleasurable. I think that was where the success in this process lies.

CS: As audience members, our contribution was authentic and real. It seemed to have veracity or truth quality to it. Because, I suppose, you weren’t asking us to perform, all you were asking was to time travel, to recollect, to go back in time.

TV: Yes, we really played with that element. I must say that, talking about this again, having not been working on it for a short period of time, but being invited back into the creative process literally by talking about it and interrogating my memory of exploring memory, makes me excited to do it again literally just to meet new people. And they’re not people that I’m going

to have a long lasting relationship with, but I feel like the impact that an artistic experience, a performance experience, can have just by cracking open those little opportunities for an audience member to get into the creative process through the performance, it means that I will have had an effect on their impression of performance and their impression of seeing a collaborative art work or going through a multimedia performance and that this might actually contribute to the culture around art in Australia or in other cultures similar to ours, and I think that's important to me, because it's always been part of my life.

Tanya brings people into a space where they share something usually considered 'internal' (early memories) or private (domestic spaces) with her, and through her, with others at the show. This context is a central element of "Retracing Steps" (and subsequent works). The 'public' or 'visible' nature of movement with, or around, or visible to others makes the experience very different to individually attempting to remember an early experience, or one's childhood house. As Tanya makes clear in the interview, that is because there is someone else, outside you, who is taking an interest (apparently) and eliciting a sense of self in relation to them, and what they are going to do or understand. Tanya's pleasure at working with these mechanisms to elicit feeling and connection is clear, as is her slight sense of surprise at how motivated audience members are to dwell in these memory spaces. There is also clearly an expectation by audience members of her interest in them as people.

Tanya's desire to engage audiences as performers comes through connecting movement to memories. As we are moving all the time, the movements that 'connect' us tend to be about spaces we share with others. It is the presence (or absence) of others or things that others do, which 'move' us to memory. Tanya's "Retracing Steps" ask us to explore how her movement is also a version of how people see and remember themselves.

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