thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation

Photo: Victoria Fortuna

Rise Up, Speak Out, Heal

by Amelia Rose Estrada

I was recently reminded of Mark Twain's purported comment, "History doesn't repeat itself, but it often rhymes." Considering historical precedent is imperative to understanding our current moment. In a time when some leaders worldwide are increasingly turning toward nationalistic, authoritarian, and racist rhetoric, examining the patterns of the past contextualizes the potential rhymes to come. Victoria Fortuna's recent book, *Moving Otherwise: Dance, Violence, and Memory in Buenos Aires*, not only considers contemporary dance in Argentina from the 1960s to the mid-2010s, but it illuminates dance's role as political critique, militant action, and coping mechanism for trauma.

After Juan Peron's government dissolved in 1955, Argentina's economy shifted toward capitalism and a booming consumer population arose. Cultural institutions including performance spaces were established throughout Buenos Aires and a burgeoning audience base engaged in the arts. In examining contemporary dance at this time, Fortuna focuses on two artists: Ana Kamien and Susana Zimmerman.

As choreographers, both women established themselves in cultural institutions that offered unprecedented visibility and infrastructure for dance. Zimmerman's early work followed mainstream modern-dance trends of the time, while Kamien swung toward the avant-garde. As an American reader with a primarily US-focused knowledge of dance history, I found it helpful to have these two women as representatives of different trends in the Buenos Aires contemporary dance scene. Kamien's work featured pedestrian gestures, parodies of classical movement, and critiques of the bourgeois gender-norms; it questioned established dance forms and the political climate of the 1960s. As her career progressed, Zimmerman's aesthetic shifted to focus on improvisational scores. Her project, Laboratorio de Danza (The Dance Laboratory, formed in 1967) and the creation of the improvisational work *Danza Ya* (Dance Now) corresponded with a time when conservative groups in the government began surveilling and targeting unconventional, left-leaning artists.

In 1966 the Argentinian military staged a coup resulting in a seven-year military junta. After a brief reemergence of the Perons (Juan and his wife Isabel) for one year, the military seized power again, resulting in the period known as the Dirty War. Between 1976 and 1983, the government "disappeared"—systematically apprehended, detained and often executed—tens of thousands of Argentine citizens in an effort to silence left-wing opponents. Leftist opposition groups mobilized to plan and undertake militant anti-government action.

Although artists were typically regarded as liberal, Fortuna explains that dancers were considered removed from the militant political movement against the conservative government. Fortuna proves, however, that contemporary concert-dance work spoke out against the regime and that dancers took direct roles in militant networks.

Three cast members of *Danza Ya*—Silvia Hodgers, María Elena Maucieri, and Alicia Sanguinetti—worked with leftist militant groups and were arrested for their political action. Fortuna reconstructs their stories carefully but also notes that there are questions she avoided and stories she did not ask the women to retell. In her interview process she was respectful of the boundary between productive information and memories too triggering to relive.

The author relays information directly from sources who witnessed and experienced dance in this time of horror and in the following years, which gives her writing immediacy. I am particularly drawn to the section where she describes how dance and performance played a role in incarceration at Rawson Penitentiary, site of the execution of 16 political prisoners in 1972, when both Hodgers and Sanguinetti were imprisoned there. The dancers recount giving performances to pass the time and the *gimnasia* (physical exercise) classes Hodgers led. Movement was particularly salient in the planned efforts to escape the prison, which ultimately failed, as articulated in a quote from the *Trelew*documentary that Fortuna uses: "We had to generate certain kinds of movement in prison that would not attract the particular attention of the inside guards.… This way, when we did escape, it would seem normal that the prison was filled with noise, music and movement" (pp. 63-64).

The movement inside Rawson was a prime example of what Fortuna calls "moving otherwise." Although codified contemporary dance was part of activism, she postulates that "moving otherwise," is a bedrock of political action that helps us theorize the relationship between movement and politics. Regulating bodies in motion is a function both of state power and also of negotiating new political possibilities. "Moving otherwise" brings protest, militant gatherings, political uprising, and even prison escapes into the dialogue of dance in this book.

After the military dictatorship fell in 1983, Argentines had to face the trauma of the preceding decades. Movement offered a physical way for people to grapple with their grief. In the chapter "Moving Trauma," Fortuna examines three tango-influenced choreographic works. Before reading this book, I was unfamiliar with tango's history as a form created by the marginalized, born out of a population of immigrants dealing with discrimination, poverty, and dislocation. Emphasized in this chapter is the idea of "home" tango, danced by Argentines to articulate "local values, memories, and performative styles of home" (p. 113). The use of tango in contemporary Argentine choreography after the Dirty War helped keep alive memory of the dictatorship's violence and the call for justice.

María Mar, created by Hodgers in 1998, was performed by five women and explored the choreographer's memories of her time in Rawson and her experience in exile. Fortuna describes Hodgers' movement as a seamless blend between contemporary dance and tango vocabularies. She cites two sections of the work where tango is particularly salient: a duet between the main character, María, and a prison guard, and the "stomach tango" performed by the women portraying prisoners. In the duet, the guard assumes the position of leader, softly drifting from side to side with her imaginary partner before kneeling atop María to grope her. María goes limp, stares into the distance, becoming an object of sexual violence. Here Hodgers uses tango to comment on violence and power, sexual assault, and torture. In contrast, the "stomach tango" is a moment of individual expression inside an improvisational structure. The women perform tango movements but instead of assuming the usual upright position, they are prone on the floor. Although in a vulnerable position, the women take ownership of their movement and bodies.

There is power in understanding art and artists' roles in political action and social commentary. In *Moving Otherwise,* Victoria Fortuna

illustrates that contemporary dance was more than cultural entertainment: artists were active participants in rising up against injustice. Fortuna exposes dance's role in militant action, in healing after government-inflicted violence, and in movement as a form of activism.

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