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Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation

Deborah Jowitt Workshop: The Renowned Dance Writer Visits With thINKing DANCE

by Julie Diana

“Crack...junk...penis...asshole.”

These are the last words you would expect to hear if you were to eavesdrop through the tall windows of Christ’s Church Neighborhood House. Last weekend renowned dance critic Deborah Jowitt sat at an oversized table, making eye contact with each of the thINKing DANCE writers surrounding her. She looked intent as her loose strands of silver hair wavered in the chilly draft. The formality of the room, with its built-in bookshelves, salmon colored walls, and crown molding, collided with the frank discussion taking place. The title of the next piece to be read aloud: “Flotation Devices and Other Sex Toys”.

The group met at Bryn Mawr College the night before to view John Jasperse’s *Fort Blossom revisited* (2000/2012), in which two of the four dancers performed naked. While the conversation with Jowitt inevitably focused on this nudity, much of the back and forth discussion also centered around the piece’s rich substance and, of course, our writing about it. Jowitt offered some brilliant advice to help us refine the nuts and bolts of our craft. This list reflects bits of her honest and detailed analyses:

- Connect the dots and follow an accurate timeline, or else you’ll confuse the reader. Don’t leave them at one point and forget to take them somewhere else.
- If you aren’t going to see the whole piece, don’t write about it. Or just admit you weren’t there. It’s okay to discuss one work on a program of ten as long as it’s clear that’s what you’re doing.
- The rhythm of your writing should reflect the rhythm of the piece.
- Be careful of saying something absolute; it will seal the work off from further interpretation.
- Get the names of dancers right and use them whenever possible.
- Know your audience and write in a style appropriate to the event. When dance is slow and provocative, like *Fort Blossom*, there’s more justification to experiment.
- Be careful of crazy metaphors.
- Prone = lying face down, supine = face up. Also, I *lay* the cup down but I *lie* down.
- Body parts are owned by the people doing the action, just as movements are owned (not “the leg lifts”, for example, but “Asriel lifted his leg”).
- Avoid repetition!
- Don’t get bogged down in too much description of movement.
- Saying what something is NOT is part of saying what something IS.

After our lunch break, we walked across the brick path to Christ’s Church and spent seven minutes absorbing its historic interior. Jowitt’s instructions for the exercise: Stroll through the church, write about what you see, and then read your observations aloud. This task illustrated how people order their perceptions in various ways. As writers, we have the freedom to feel differently, but we must still observe with accuracy.

The next morning, we convened at the LAB (Live Arts Brewery) to finish going through our Jasperse reviews. Jowitt rolled her tiny suitcase into the conference room and claimed a seat at the long table. We passed around croissants and cookies and listened to Jowitt

as she sprinkled the discussion with entertaining stories. (Anna Kisselgoff used to run into a phone booth after a performance to call in her review, dictating to someone at the NY Times on the other end of the line...A prominent Bay Area critic wrote a scalding review of a Russian pas de deux that not part of the performance. He then had to resign.)

Jowitt's candor continued into the Q & A session that followed. Open to the public, this workshop-weekend-finale shed light on Jowitt and her illustrious career. Questions touched on her start as a writer in the 60's, her time writing for the *Village Voice*, and the freedom she finds publishing articles online versus in print. Then, someone asked what role reviews play in dance preservation. Jowitt's response was this:

"You can't reconstruct a dance from a review, but they play a role in preserving them; what people at the time saw in a work, what they made of it. This is invaluable. Any description of movement, an image, a costume is very valuable."

Her words justify why dance criticism is a vital tool. Our workshop's talk about "butt cracks", for example, put the Jasperse piece in context; the men's anatomy could not be ignored, and the intimate space in which they performed inspired the writers to use a colloquial tone. Jowitt says that writers must service the performance. We have to make the work visual and analyze what we see. "[Dance criticism] is a secondary art," she says. "It's a transparency through which to show a personal impression of something else." At thINKing DANCE, this is one of the goals we are striving to achieve.

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March 8, 2012