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Photo: Babette Mangolte

From the Studio: Trisha Brown's 'Line Up' in Italy

By: Lisa Kraus

The texts that follow are excerpted from emails describing the reconstruction of Trisha Brown's *Line Up* (1976) on students of Milan's Paolo Grassi School for performances in the [Venice Biennale](#). They are addressed to former Trisha Brown Dance Company colleagues Eva Karczag and Elena Demyanenko, to students in the project, and to the company's Director of Education, Dorothee Alemany.

June 23

Dear Eva,

Been wanting to write about the work in Milan so I'll use writing to you as an excuse.

It has been a slightly weird set-up: two weeks in April with me introducing the basic approach of *Line Up*, working on physical practice, how to "build" through improvisation, how to attend to detail and a sense of awareness in the group. Teaching Solo Olos from the start because its complexity needs so much time to digest. Then Elena doing the body of the work on the piece with developing new *Line Up* sections, teaching the sections like Scallops and Eights and putting it all together. Then for two weeks the group running the piece with just a bit of outside eye from a faculty member at the school. Then me back again. A sandwich.

Before leaving in April I'd told the group that coming back to see what they made would be like Christmas. And so it was—surprise after surprise. A piece for 5 originally, expanded for 13 (like what I did for Franklin & Marshall only bigger cast and full-length version). Several sections were very strong with so many dancers.

There was some misunderstanding about what should happen in Spanish Dance based on one teacher's input, so they all were turning their faces forward and staring out at the audience immediately when beginning to raise their arms, making for a weird cloned and blank

theatrical/not theatrical look.

In fact, when I was rehearsing Spanish in January with the “veteran dancers” for the benefit in New York, we were reminded by Di* that how we execute the actions –connecting through knees and hips, raising arms, proceeding forward--is up to us. In the performance, Vick did something I couldn't see, but it was some comically-timed flourish and the audience erupted in laughter. So yesterday I said to the students that Spanish is a moment when the cool post-modernist meets the sexy, earthy sensualist. The face expresses the understanding that this is and isn't a joke.

All this was happening in the context of my return to coach the group for ONE day. Imagine coming to take over directing after so many cooks have been involved and you haven't even seen the outcome! But it was valuable. The elegance and clean-ness of the whole is so dependent on transitions from one section to another that we worked through each shift very thoroughly, amending some of what they were charged with doing. I think the word I was using to describe what we were after was made up—“pulissimo”—but people took delight in it and it seemed like the right one: ‘pulire’ is to clean and in English ‘issimo’ is always ‘the most.’ So much for purity.

Then there was work on separate sections: how to stay attentive to spatial shifts in the group in the opening of Solo Olos so that the set-ups read clearly, how much time to take to let an image register before it dissolves, how to keep Scallops timed in a regular way rather than stretching and shrinking time-wise. There are so many structures that require immense precision and rules that need to be super clear for the dancers. That's what makes it possible for the audience to enjoy following along.

Today we will be on the stage at the Arsenale in Venice. I read on Wikipedia that the Arsenale, where they built the ships of the Venetian fleet starting in around 1104 (!), was the largest area of industrial production until the Industrial Revolution. The buildings are brick and vast. The Biennale takes them over for exhibits of all kinds, and it was heartbreaking to be shown spaces in April that were spectacular but unusable for *Line Up*. One interior vista stretching into the vast distance was all arch-ceilinged chambers one leading into another into another.



The students are finishing their schooling. This is their final production after three years of study. So it's a big deal and very charged for them. They were a bit disappointed on first seeing *Line Up* that it wouldn't let them show their stuff in a more athletic and virtuosic way. It's a less obvious virtuosity that *Line Up* asks of its performers. And I remember so well the feeling of champing at the bit as a young dancer. I wanted to get my dancing rocks off, be inventive, edgy. They are like that. And incredibly sweet.

Anyway, more soon. See you in NL.

xox

Lisa



June 26

Hi Elena,

We finished on Friday. I stuck around one extra day to wander and see the Forsythe installation and Wim Vanderkeybus' new piece and then traveled up to Holland. I've been processing the experience since.

Seeing what you made with the students was absolutely wonderful. I think your choices about numbers of performers in the sections and how to bring people on and when to let things clear were excellent. Despite the large cast, the "chaos" was just the right kind—full of connections that were very satisfying to witness. The students worked in a focused, eager way this time. The first performance, charged as it was with all the excitement of being in Venice, was really fantastic. Clear, energized but not speedy, delicious! In the second performance things got a little loopy. They had walked in the hot Venetian sun as tourists, they were sad about the project ending, confused about their school career finishing. Some had personal issues making them tender. In all, the dancers were less present leading to a performance a shade less convincing than the marvelous one the night before.

I was unsure how to deal with finishing in that way, so with Eva's encouragement wrote a note to everyone complimenting them again on the good work they did and posing some questions about performing in general that they can use to grow further in the future. I can send it to you also if you want.

Are you in New York either before July 9 or after the 19th? It'd be nice to have a "closing" get-together! I so admire what you were able to do with them. They said over and over how they really appreciated working with both of us--that it was very helpful how we offered different perspectives and methods.

So, let me know about your timing. Thanks for being a teammate with me for *Line Up*!!!

xox

Lisa

From the June 25 note to the students:

...There are a lot of questions one can ask oneself before and around a performance:

What changes or suggestions were made in recent rehearsals that I should be remembering? How can I ground myself and be in the best state physically and mentally as I walk onstage? How can I allow each section to have its proper timing, without rushing, especially at endings, but at the same time be awake and have a sense of liveliness and momentum? How can I feel the full group, especially as something new begins? How can I be assertive and take my space (even with my voice) while still feeling part of the whole? How can I

relax so that if anything unexpected comes up I will use my best instincts in the moment rather than panicking?
All these are issues that performers face over and over and that arose (of course!) in our two shows in Venice.

I always think that after a show it's really important to take time to feel a deep sense of accomplishment. How good and important it is that it all happened! Then, weeks or days later, there is room to ask what will be carried forward to keep in mind in the future. That makes the learning complete...

July 2

Hi Dorothée,

I'm fully back now and wanted to let you know that the performances in Venice were much appreciated and the dancers looked really wonderful. Our one day of rehearsal in Milan was very productive for tweaking and refining. Then they had a great, energized and well-focused first show and one slightly less 'on' but still quite good. Did you see the [Victoria Looseleaf clip](#) talking about how important it is that Trisha's work be shown in that way? Hats off to YOU for making it happen!!

Elena and I plan to meet to wrap up our conversation about the project when she's back from Russia. She was absolutely fantastic as a teaching partner, and I think made some wonderful decisions on how to guide the students and shape the piece with 13 people in it.

In all, it was a great experience and I am so grateful to have been part of it!!

All best,

Lisa



Pictured L to R: Lisa Kraus, Anita Faconti, Simona Cutrignelli , Camilla Parini , Eleonora Soricaro, Giuseppe Brancaccio, Clarissa Colombani, Eugenia Coscarella, Bianca Migliorati, Francesco Napoli, Marta Ventura, Anna Guarinoni , Mauro Losapio, Francesco Marinello .

July 11

Dear Lisa,

I found extremely important the email you sent us at the end of the work. I read it several times, I took time to think about what sense its content has related with the experience through the Master Class.

The questions we must ask ourselves before performing and about the performance itself deserve lot of attention. I can not give an answer to most of them, but I continue to question. I want these questions to accompany me in the future and intend to commit myself as a dancer looking for possible solutions.

The whole process has been both training and educational. I felt my body moving in the space fluently, with harmony and safety at the same time. By bounding my body to follow functional goals I discovered new ways and endless possibilities. I hope I have somewhere in the body metabolized the fundamental principles that we have passed and I have experienced in the classroom. I also learned a lot from your educational approach that supported every single lesson and escorted us through the process of work instilling more confidence day by day. I experienced what it means to structure a lesson and a training program in a functional way, by growing together quality of the work, quality of learning, confidence, serenity and passion in team. If one day become a teacher, I would be happy that my students have with me the memory I have of you now.

G r a z i e !

Ciao,

Anna

*Diane Madden, longtime Trisha Brown Dance Company member and rehearsal director

By Lisa Kraus

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