

Interview with Daniel Nagrin

Cynthia Roses-Thema

Daniel Nagrin, at age eighty-five, is said by some to be one of the finest dancers in the twentieth century. He has worked with human movement as a vehicle for self-expression and social commentary for over fifty years, studying and exploring it from the inside, from a dancer's perspective. Nagrin is often called "The Lone Dancer" because his fame emanates from a career as a solo artist. It is Nagrin's focus on creating the "Other" throughout his works that correlates with the viewpoint of the anthropologist who searches to understand the meaning of the dance they are studying through understanding the "Other's" culture. Nagrin looked at American counterculture in creating his most famous solo about the gangster in "Strange Hero," but it was his solo about an African-American, entitled "Not Me, But Him," created in 1965, that most blatantly describes how the choreographic focus of Nagrin's work was on the "Other."

Watching this solo on videotape, one sees Nagrin, dressed in white T-shirt, pants, shoes and socks, on a bare stage except for a table which holds his reel-to-reel tape recorder. He holds up a mask of an African-American with no adornments at all on it. The camera focuses on the mask and one hears Nagrin's theatre voice say, "Not Me, But Him." Nagrin turns his back on the audience, places the mask on his face and takes a pose with one arm forward and one back looking as if he had been just dropped on the planet, frozen, in the midst of action. With the first chords of the music he abruptly turns to face the audience taking a lopsided stance, with arms by his waist. His fingers walk across his chest, his head, like a bird, pans the ceiling with jerky stops and starts. He begins to walk forward one leg sensually taking the place of the other. During the dance one witnesses a lynching from the character's point of view and an intense moment of prayer. Nagrin himself recalled this work in an interview with me conducted on Thursday, December 18, 2002, on campus at Arizona State University. Presented here are excerpts from that interview:

Cynthia Roses-Thema: When you look back at the dances you've created. where do you put, "Not Me, But Him"?

Daniel Nagrin: It's a little muddy, a little unnecessarily complex, but it's a good dance.

CR-T: You speak in the book, *The Six Questions*, of letting images come to you and letting them find you when you are trying to create a character. When you created "Not Me, But Him" did that happen to you?

DN: No, no, there again I wanted to do something. I mean, there I was aware of something and I wanted to fill it out. What it is, is private and becomes the task of the viewer to decipher.

CR-T: This character you created: was he one person or was he a compilation?

DN: I never thought of him as anything other than himself. I just put this person in certain situations and then I did what he does.

CR-T: When you performed this through the course of time, did the character change at all? Did you discover something about him?

DN: I'm not aware of an evolution, of a changing. It wasn't an easy dance to do. It's physically demanding. The music was always a wrestling match.

CR-T: Can you explain about creating the movement? In a *Dance Magazine* (1976) review by David Vaughn he quotes you as saying, "you have to find the movement through character." When you find the person you're going to create how do you translate that into movement?

DN: This is what I learned from [Helen] Tamiris. We're talking all the time, you and I are talking. You're talking right now. Your whole body is talking right now. If you're in a dance and you're supposed to be doing something, just do it. Only you explore all the physical resonances of it and the depths of it and the possibilities of it.

CR-T: You speak in your book, *The Six Questions* about how creating the steps—it sometimes takes you a long time and they have to feel just right for you to put them into your dance.

DN: You get an idea and you do something and it doesn't feel right, so you don't do it.

CR-T: It doesn't feel right to you or to the character?

DN: What's the difference? I don't have a problem with that. You know what I just said? I don't have a problem with that. Once I slip into it I am myself there.

CR-T: So you literally become...

DN: Well I'm thinking like that but I'm thinking like me, "dancer." I do something and it won't feel right so I do something else. It's like writing. You write something down. You know what you're thinking but that doesn't look like it. See? You keep reconstructing the sentence until there's something there. It's not more complicated than that. The sense of rightness is what carries us through the profession. How do you get a sense of rightness? You read books, you go to dance concerts, you look at children, you look at pigeons, you look at pictures on the wall and they're crooked. There are people who try to ask you to define art or they ask you to define dance, and of course, it's silly. These are things you don't touch and you can't define rightness. You just see it, you know it. And so you go to a dance concert and people are doing a lot of things and they're doing things about what they learned and then someone gets on the stage and they go [he creates a frozen face] and you're transfixed. This is too mysterious to define and I don't define it in the book. There's no way you can define it.

CR-T: The thing that strikes me most when I watch the videos of you dancing is your musicality.

DN: In my early days in all the things I composed I knew precisely what I was doing. I had to, musically. I had to know everything musically because I thought I wasn't musical. I was scared.

CR-T: You thought you weren't musical?

DN: Yeah. I studied with the Dalcroze people to get music, but my teacher sent me away saying I didn't need her, but I was uncertain. I came to dance late and I had trouble with music. I tried to play the piano and I couldn't get my two hands to work. I gave up. I can't play a tune. I can't read music. I could come with lots of crosses and fears, ah but I love music and I really listen to it and I dance to it. The point is, I used music the way I would dance with another person. We're not saying the same thing. Sometimes you do. So sometimes I'm with it and sometimes I'm listening to it and I'm answering it, so it's a dialectic. Also, with music that's difficult I allow myself the privilege of not being accurate. In other words if you would look to another performance you would see me handling phrases differently. I'm listening to the phrase and I'm bouncing up and against it. You know the game Pachenko? The Japanese play it with a little ball that goes down and it bounces. It is always organic. It's always hitting something. So I am always dancing on the beat, off the beat, but I'm listening to it, I'm dodging it, I'm fighting it, I'm ducking it, I'm screwing it. So it's a very fierce constant interaction with the music. I don't dare stop listening. I don't dare float on it.

CR-T: Philosophically would it be correct to say you are a humanist?

DN: There's so much slop that has been written under the name, 'humanist'. And then, of course, we have a whole bunch of tired cynical people who go for a certain sophistication. And certain words like 'liberal', 'bleeding hearts', and 'humanist' have been so successfully trampled upon that they are very hard to use because there are some hyper neo-reactionary intellectuals who really know the vocabulary who have trashed those words.

CR-T: Can I ask you about modern and post-modern?

DN: No. [followed by laughter]

CR-T: Well that took care of that.

DN: What do you mean by post-modern? Who is post-modern?

CR-T: That's what I was going to ask you because I think it's all in who you say is post-modern.

DN: You talk about Yvonne [Rainer]? Is Yvonne post-modern? From forty years ago. Is that post-modern?

CR-T: You talk about post-modern theory in your book. You say "I believe that there is no way to enter the stage space, to appear before the others, [the

audience], without assuming a role, regardless of what the post-modern theorists claim in their manifestos " (p.7).

DN: Oh, well I'm talking about them. The whole *schtick* flowing out of Merce [Cunningham] simply puts the focus on the medium. This all starts with Flaubert who said he would love to write about nothing. You listen to Flaubert's manifesto: it's exactly what post-moderns say. They don't want to deal with people. They want to deal with things. They want to deal with extensions and pliés and beats and words that don't have to mean anything as long as they say them. They're not interested in people. They're not interested in you. They don't plumb your depths. In other words, they're not humanists. They're playing with things. My picture of the post-modern: they are wealthy kids. Of course a lot of them aren't. But, it's like wealthy kids stuck home on a rainy afternoon and what are they going to do? Something—do something and their part is doing something. They make dance a thing. A thing. It's not something you hate or don't hate. You take a line, an arabesque and you do it north, south, east and west and then you reverse it. And things can be quite elegant and beautiful in their own right. See, I don't mind if you take a tie and you make a gorgeous decoration. I love that. A tie, see, or a rug, but if you make a painting like that what? Why? A tie you fill it out, you know it can be lively. I don't have to go to the theatre to make life lively. It *is* lively. They're trying to make things more important than you and me.

CR-T: Do you think that's a reflection of our technological emphasis?

DN: No. It's that they can't deal with us and they don't want to deal with us.

CR-T: And you still don't think it might be a reaction to the world that is so absolutely crazy?

DN: Oh sure, they can't take it. They don't want to deal with it. I mean my bitter thing is the way I say it and it upsets a lot of people. When I do say it, is that that whole group grew and flourished like mushrooms in the dark while Vietnam was going on. You wouldn't know that that war had taken place. If you looked at their art, you wouldn't know what had happened in the world, you wouldn't have the faintest idea, because they don't want to know.

CR-T: In your work you talk about not caring whether you're liked or not—about not caring whether you are liked by the audience.

DN: It's not true. I want to be liked, but I won't raise a finger to curry an audience's favor. I do what I have to do. If you like it—great, if you don't like it—tough. Is that clear?

CR-T: John Munger of the Dance/USA organization did a study on modern dance companies and he found, economically, that the small to moderate companies are not doing well and he found the audiences are hesitant to spend money on companies that are not known.

DN: Audiences want to go to what they know is good.

CR-T: And the attitude of not needing to be liked by the audience will sometimes bring about failure. How do you walk that line in today's world as a dancer?

DN: You risk failure. If you know what you want to do, you do it. You don't make it so that they like you. You're not a tart working to pick up a trick. I'm not talking about entertainment, I'm talking about art. They're two different things. Sometimes what you do gains tremendous popularity but it still can be a work of art. It's still a challenge.

CR-T: A challenge for you or for the audience?

DN: For both.

CR-T: In that way you follow your Brechtian ideas and not your Stanislavskian idea?

DN: In entertainment everything is given to you [breaks into a rendition of "There's No Business Like Show Business," then stops abruptly]

CR-T: You don't think they can marry?

DN: Sure, but they're not the same. In entertainment everything is given. You as the audience have no work to do. You have no responsibility. You're led here and there and you know exactly what to do. As an artist, you're either presenting something that is a challenge, something that is mysterious, something that confuses you as an artist, as a person, as a human being, and you want people to pay attention to it because it needs attention.

CR-T: In the appendix of *The Six Questions* you include Federico Garcia Lorca's 1930 essay on *Duende*. Would you describe your understanding or interpretation of the concept *duende*?

DN: There are certain performers whom I have always admired and I suspect that they were able to enter into and use that quality in their work. Very briefly, it's the rare and exceptional moment when all of you is in what you're doing. It means your feelings, your emotions are not channeled, curtailed or directed to what is considered nice and attractive, good, and civilized. Helen Tamiris had a word, an expression which she would hammer at students who were nice, careful, intelligent. She would say, "You don't follow through." Anna Sokolow had her own expression—one word she would slam at students—most students. It was MORE! In other words, they would do something and she would say, "More. More."

One of the enemies of good art is good taste. And when you have *duende* you don't bother with good taste. You go to what you're dealing with demands, and how you are responding to it. Are you responding to it fully with all of your being or are you being careful to do something that other people will like? Are you being careful to look nice? Are you being careful about your looks? If you have to be careful about how you appear and how you look when you are producing your art, you cannot possibly have *duende*. If you don't know how you look you may have *duende*. It happens very

rarely. Your mind is never pure. When you are in the full flood of emotion you also flip in and out of consciousness. In exciting performances it's a matter of oscillation. No matter how emotional you get, you can't go to the end of the stage because you'll fall off. People who say of some dancers, "They're so emotional"—remarks like that come from people who are nice and want you to dance nicely.

CR-T: You mention Helen Tamiris frequently and dedicate the book *The Six Questions* to her. Why do you think she is not credited historically with being a major pioneer of modern dance?

DN: Why Tamiris was, in a sense, pushed to the edge, is very complex. I would guess she went for this level of passion and emotion and lack of good taste that goes with what is called *duende* a little more than did the rest of the field. She was a firebrand—socially, politically and artistically. And she frightened people. When you frighten people they back off. So when they set up Bennington [University] they didn't invite her. The American Dance Festival never invited her until they invited me, at which time, they realized they had to have her. There was an aspect of Tamiris' work which the others barely touched upon and that was her use of jazz which was not regarded with respect by the rest of the field and by some of the critics. In her first concerts, in 1927 and 1928 she was doing and dancing jazz because this is the dance of America. This was her understanding of what she should be doing.

CR-T: What can you tell those of us who never had the opportunity to see her? Why should we remember her?

DN: There is a great difference between dancers who do the motions and dancers who have an inner life that demands that the leg be raised. You don't raise the leg because the choreographer is there. It's because you are a certain kind of human being and there is no other way. This is what Tamiris taught and this is how she danced.