

Toward a Process for Critical Response,

by Liz Lerman

Several years ago, I finally acknowledged to myself how uncomfortable I was around most aspects of criticism. I had been involved in the process of creating art and teaching art for a very long time, but I had not found peace with my many questions and with the array of feelings brought up by both giving and receiving criticism. I found so-called “feed-back sessions” to be often brutal and frequently not very helpful. I couldn’t seem to solve my needs during post-performance rituals of backstage chatter. I had trouble getting it, and I had trouble giving it. I became uncomfortable at other people’s concerts where much of my experience of the evening included a subtext of internal complaining about what I was seeing. I began to dislike residency activities where, without knowing anything about the dancers, I was being asked to comment on their work. I even began to question the basic premises underlying my composition teaching because I was troubled about the nature of my response to the work being created by my students. I had plenty to say. That wasn’t the problem. But I kept wondering why I was saying it.

This much was clear to me. The more I worked as a choreographer, the fewer people I trusted to tell me about my work, since much of what I received in the form of criticism from others seemed to tell me more about their biases and expectations than about the particular dance of mine being discussed. It didn’t seem to me to really be about helping me to make the best dance I could from my *own* imagination. At the same time, it seemed that the more I saw of other peoples’ work, the more it became clear to me that what I criticized in their work was that it wasn’t like mine. If I didn’t see my own ideas confirmed in the work of others, I found myself being very critical--my critical comments told me more about myself than about the nature of the work I was seeing.

So, in the past few years I have been evolving a system of peer response. It is grounded first and foremost on my own experience as a choreographer. I discovered that the more I made public my own questions about the work, my work, the more eager I was to engage in a dialog about how to “fix” the problem. This process began unconsciously as a way of working with dancers in my company, as a way of talking with my husband Jon Spelman in our extended conversations, and with a few choreographers/friends. I found that often, just talking about the messes that are an inevitable part of creating new work, talking about it out loud from my perspective, pointed a way out of the dilemma. I began to wonder what would happen if critical sessions were indeed in the control of the artist. I experimented with various approaches while teaching composition at the American Dance Festival and the Colorado Dance Festival. That is when I noticed that the more I gently questioned my students, the deeper we got into their own work. Its motivation and meaning to the creator became the basis on which feedback was given. I found that I could raise all of my concerns in this manner and amazingly there was no resistance.

There are several basic preconditions to all of this for both artist/creators and observers/responders. We creators need to be in a place where we can question our own work and be able to do it in a somewhat public environment. We also need to be able to hear positive comments that are NOT “this is the greatest thing I have ever seen.” I am convinced that since we all wait for that comment, we have a hard time hearing anything else. There are two preconditions for the observers. First, it is important that we want this artist to make excellent work. I think sometimes, for a host of reasons, people looking at work don’t want the artist to succeed, especially on his or her own terms. So this notion of actively harnessing our responses to the idea of another person’s excellence is not always achievable, but worth working towards. The second precondition is that the observer/responders need to be able to form their own opinions into a neutral position.

Although these sessions are geared to the needs of the creator, it is important to have a facilitator who will keep things moving, and keep people on track. One way the facilitator does this is to continue to fine-tune the process. In fact, I find if I tell people I am still working on its evolution (I

am) and that I might get confused at times (I do) and that we may have to stop the action of responding to someone's work while we question the process (this has happened), all of this openness creates an environment where good critical thinking can take place.

Here's how it works. The day after a performance, a facilitator might gather with the artist and with a group of people to discuss what they have seen. Or it could take place directly after a showing, if the artist is ready. In composition classes, it can happen after each presentation, no matter how short, and indeed the whole process can take as short as five minutes (in the case of a fragment) or as long as people are willing to sit and talk.

STEP ONE: AFFIRMATION

It is my sense, that no matter how short the performance, people want to hear that what they have just completed has meaning to another human being. This natural condition appears to be so intense at times as to appear desperate. My own experience points to the very fragile moment when we first show another person our creative effort, whether a fragment or a completed work, new or old. It makes sense to me, then, that the first response takes the form of some kind of affirmation. (Remember, it is not going to be "that is the greatest thing ever," but it does need to be honest and true for the responder.) So I have been trying to expand the palette of what constitutes positive feedback. I like to use words such as "when you did such-and-such it was surprising, challenging, evocative, compelling, delightful, unique, touching, poignant, different for you, interesting," and many more.

I am aware that there are many people exploring the question of feedback; one way that folks are working a lot right now is for people to practice saying what they saw--with the idea that there is no positive or negative implied. I too have experimented with that approach, using it here in step one. However, I keep coming back to the need for positive, affirmative information. I suspect that people will challenge this as being too needy, too thin-skinned. But after all these years of doing work, and after many positive comments from others, it still makes sense to me that we tell each other at least one thing that we noticed about the work being discussed that brought us something special.

STEP TWO: ARTIST AS QUESTIONER

The creator asks the questions first. The more artists clarify what they are working on and where their own questions are, the more intense and deep the dialog becomes. These questions need to be quite specific. It doesn't work to say "tell me what you think" since in my experience people don't really mean that, and if we do tell them what we think, they get defensive. But if a person says, "Do you think my arm should be this way or this way?" or "I'm working right now on the way I express a strong feeling, what did you think of this section?" the respondents are given the opportunity to say exactly what they think in a way the creator is prepared to hear.

One of the jobs of the facilitator is to help artists find their questions. Some artists are quite able to analyze their work, and form their dissatisfactions or dilemmas into specific questions with ease. For others, it is a new experience. So an artist might pose a very general question, and the facilitator can help make it specific and find the real heart of the matter. But the artist needs to raise the subject first, and the facilitator needs to probe with more questions, not with answers.

Speaking anecdotally from what I myself have experienced, as the artist whose work is being discussed and as a facilitator, it seems that usually the artist has the same questions that those watching do. When the artist starts the dialog, the opportunity for honesty increases.

STEP THREE: RESPONDERS ASK THE QUESTION

The responders form their opinions into a neutral question. So instead of saying, "It's too long," a person might ask, "What were you trying to accomplish in the circle section?" or "Tell me what's the most important idea you want us to get and where is that happening in this piece?"

This is another area in which the facilitator needs to be active. For many people, forming a neutral question is not only difficult, but a seemingly ridiculous task if criticism is the point. I have discovered, though, that the actual process of trying to form opinions into neutral questions is precisely the process necessary to get to the questions that matter for the artist.

I know that for some people this sounds again like a cover-up for the real action and, for some, it is at first. But I have observed that after some experience of this approach, even the most hard edged, "I-can-take-any-thing-you-dish-out" artist is more open and involved in the critical session. And more open to the possibility of hearing what others are saying, and actually learning from it.

It's important to remember that this process is not telling an artist how to improve their work. Therefore this can be a difficult step for people who are used to giving feedback from a position of authority: teachers, directors, folks called in to "fix" a piece. (I don't know about critics, I haven't tried it with them yet.) For some it might seem like giving up the right to tell the truth very directly. What I have found for myself, however, is that I can say whatever is important through this mechanism, and that what I can't say probably couldn't be heard, or isn't relevant.

STEP FOUR: OPINION TIME

Let's say that an observer really has an opinion that can't be stated as a neutral question and this person feels that the artist really needs to hear it. In step four the responder asks permission to state an opinion: "I have an opinion about the costumes. Do you want to hear it?" Now this artist may be very interested in hearing about the costumes, but not from that person, so he or she can say no--or yes--or no, not now but later.

I really think that most of our reactions to work, which we all try to formulate as mature criticism, are indeed merely opinion. There are times when artists can use these opinions to help place the work in a larger context. There are times when artists can hear all of these opinions and use them to weave his or her own solution. But artists may not want to hear from everyone, or everyone at a particular time. In this process, the artist can control this moment.

This is the one place in the process where people can actively offer suggestions. One simply says, "I have an opinion on a direction you could go in, would you like to hear it?" Again, the artist can say yes or no.

I have never been at a session where an artist hasn't been willing to hear from everyone. It is curious to note that often during this opinion time, people choose to do more affirmation. Usually by this time, so much has been discussed that there is not too much left to be said.

This can complete the process in most settings. However, after exploring this process more publicly under the auspices of Alternate ROOTS at an Annual Meeting, I have added two more steps.

STEP FIVE: SUBJECT MATTER DISCUSSION

Sometimes the subject matter of a work is such that responders want to get into a discussion about its content. The discussion may or may not relate to the specific evolution of the piece. In order not to break the momentum of the peer response to work, one can just table the discussion for this step. For example: a person seeing my work "The Good Jew?" wanted to get into a discussion about the Covenant and its relation to contemporary Jews. I suggested we wait and talk about it later since it was a more theoretical discussion of some concern to some people.

My friend and colleague Sally Nash has recently contributed another possible use for this step. She appreciates hearing what personal stories, memories or feelings come up for people as they watch her work; these could be told at this step. I suspect that it might also happen

during the first step as a kind of affirmation depending on the way it is stated, and the facilitator's sense of the momentum of the discussion.

STEP SIX: WORKING ON THE WORK

Sometimes after a session like this, the artist may be ready to get to work on a particular section. If a relationship has been set up in advance, then "labbing" the work can be very fruitful. I suggest this be done with only one person in charge (the teacher, the facilitator, the friend). Others may watch if that is OK with both parties involved.

That is what I know of this process now, in the fall of 1993. I hope that people will try it, refine it, and let me know how it works for them. In my travels this past year, I have discovered that many artists are working on their own processes for dialog about work. For some, it is an ongoing part of the creative work with company members, for others an organized part of the dance community's efforts to support each other. I am hopeful about all this activity, and hopeful that at some time in the future all these efforts can build to some dialog among those who write about art, those who fund art and those who make art.