

CHAPTER 4

AND THEN...: REVEALING THE TEACHINGS OF THE PRAYING MANTIS

By jacki job

INTRODUCTION

To begin, please allow me to contextualise my ongoing wrestling with identity. Since a young child, I have instinctively been resistant to labelling and boxing people on the basis of their external appearance. This is challenging inside the complex, racialised framework of South Africa, where people are stratified according to fabricated racist formulae and designated privilege or disadvantage through calculating combinations of hair textures, facial features and skin tones. On a daily basis, individuals play out these confabulated equations to assume the knowledge, experience and personality traits of others. With the term 'Coloured' being the official racial category assigned to me at birth, a stereotype of my growing up in a neighbourhood rife with gangsters, pregnant teenagers and unemployment, is common. Given the fact that my genetic pool is configured by several geographic and cultural intersections, these reductive descriptors most definitely do not account for the sum of my capacities, wisdom and ways of being a person in this world. I have deliberately shaped my worldview with re-imagining alternative narratives that reveal visceral connections with others beyond a humancentric understanding of self.

Since the start of my independent dance career in 1994, my solo performances have held animal-human configurations, which aim to dissolve embedded, singular and racialised speculations of identity. In this regard, I created a body of work based on an original, centauresque persona, *Daai za Lady*.⁹ Over the years, *Daai za Lady* has moved from its initial half-horse, half-woman construction, to a more complex character that incorporates male, female, animal, plant and insect parts. Whilst living in Japan for eight years, I studied Butoh and simultaneously assimilated its principles into my signature of performance-making. Since returning to South Africa in 2011, I have completed my Honours, MA and PhD degrees.

My practice within these processes gradually revealed critical parallels with socio-political issues. The solo performance created for my Honours looked at the complexities of love by comparing historical slavery with people's current enslavement to poverty and drugs. For my MA, I taught a series of Butoh workshops to a small group of professional dancers of Cape Town City Ballet Company. With this inquiry it became clear how the application of Butoh principles in combination with my self-developed Movement

9 *Daai za Lady* translates into English as 'That's a Lady'.

Dynamics™ techniques,¹⁰ could shift ballet dancers' largely external focus to one of introspection and imagination. The commencement of my PhD in 2017 coincided with a full-time appointment at the University of Cape Town. Since then, the academic articulation of my performance practice and philosophies, as well as the consciousness of my grappling with how social ideological change might be effected through psychophysical embodiment techniques, deepened. The PhD analysed 24 iterations of *Daai za Lady*, moving from its initial centaur-esque persona in 1994, to its embodiment of the praying mantis in an ongoing series named *And then....*, performed between 2018 and 2021. I focused on how performance principles of difficulty, difference, strangeness and the unknown were pivotal to practical and political discourses of identification.

Recently, I have begun to explicate *Daai za Lady* as a way of being, and I use the neologism, *philosoembodology*, to describe an embodied ontology constructed by a set of guiding principles that, like philosophy, remains open to interpretation and evolution. Several facets of *Daai za Lady* have been detailed in other writings and will not be re-animated in this chapter (job, 2019a & b; 2021a & b). Rather, here I will elucidate how my paying attention to personal, social and political struggles has moved *Daai za Lady* to its current inspiration, the praying mantis. I will discuss *And then....*, a dance series that continues to configure an idiosyncratic vocabulary which in turn hones my evolving understanding of personhood and transformation in South Africa.

MOVEMENT DYNAMICS™

Movement dynamics is a self-developed, psycho-physical technique “often taught in the warm-up phase of my teaching sessions. It comprises a series of physical, cardio-vascular, and muscle toning exercises and movements, to bring awareness, release, and a different perception to what may be considered as smaller or even hidden parts of the body. [...] Movement Dynamics also brings a consciousness to the surrounding environment and prepares the body to find meta-physical meaning [through the application] of various Butoh principles” (job, 2019:458).]

AND THEN... THE BEGINNING

Relating to the praying mantis first occurred to me in India when, in 2017, I performed in Thrikkaipetta, a remote village in the Wayanad district of Kerala. Prior to travelling to India, I had been dealing with a series of challenging financial and emotional circumstances in my private life. Arriving in the verdant landscape of Kerala, therefore, seemed to promise

¹⁰ Movement Dynamics is “often taught in the warm-up phase of my teaching sessions. It comprises a series of physical, cardio-vascular, and muscle toning exercises and movements, to bring awareness, release, and a different perception to what may be considered as smaller or even hidden parts of the body. [...] Movement Dynamics also brings a consciousness to the surrounding environment and prepares the body to find meta-physical meaning [through] the exploration of various Butoh principles” (job, 2019:458).

new beginnings. Practising in the woody landscape surrounding the village, I recall having the distinct image of stumbling across dunes in the desert towards a mirage. To remain psycho-physically connected to this iridescent image, I refrained from holding on to any particular movement with clarity, and rather, concentrated on the sensations and images formed in the interplay of my imagination and physical movements, as well as shifts in the air currents and light of the surrounding natural environment. Consequently, as if conjured in the vibration of these multiple elements, I began to – and here I borrow from Deleuze and Guattari (2005) – sense a molecular proximity to something other than my human self that existed outside of my programmed body: a praying mantis. Immediately, I followed “an impulse, an idea, an intuition, a hunch” (Fleishman, 2012:34) that sparked a corporeal conceptualisation of transformation.

Whereas *Daai za Lady* began as a centauresque figure that portrayed the plurality of my identity, embodying the praying mantis became a way to reflect on the significance of multiple transforming identities in South Africa. For example, I correlate the idiosyncratic movements of the praying mantis with the zeitgeist of South Africa. The constant shaking of the mantis mirrors the nervousness, imbalance and unease generally felt by many South Africans (job, 2021). I think of the praying mantis as a teacher, and therefore, the shaking holds deeper implications which might generatively agitate new thinking around identity. I relate the constant shaking movement to an impression of uncertainty. In a South African context, notions of indecisiveness become socio-politically provocative, as stable, bold and clear descriptions of identity measure the distance and the successful ways in which Black people have moved beyond the debilitating racial configurations of apartheid. However, *And then...* digs into qualities of weakness, imbalance, indecision and vulnerability that arise from the current dire socio-economic conditions and insecure psychological states in South Africa, to potentially provoke new meanings for personhood and transformation. These ideas were revealed processually and particularly developed through practice as research methodologies.

For me, creating a dance work is like what Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes as “a step taken in the fog – no one can say where, if anywhere, it will lead” (1964:21). Daily physical workouts, personal events, private musings and intimate experiences in my everyday worlds have also consistently catalysed my artistic concepts. For example, a regular four kilometre run in my neighbourhood includes the ascent and descent of one-hundred-and-twenty stairs, repeated five times in various combinations. This develops physical discipline and endurance, as well as reinforces and embodies a philosophy of change that is held in repetitive acts. Moreover, at one point a few years ago, I was craving a deeper sensual embodiment and desired the palpability of touch and the unobtrusive vitality of breath in my intimate relations.

In connecting my daily life with my practice, I pondered on these ideas and wondered how my dance could enable a visceral sense of connection with others and exceed notions I held of myself. I put the body in research, employing Butoh principles of exploring the world of the secret, or the unknown, and moved into what I refer to as, a thinking-feeling-doing-dreaming mode of making. This requires paying attention to everything, seeing and trusting the interpenetration of manifold material objects, conscious and unintended

actions, as well as the interplays of spirit. In this way, my everyday life and dance practice remain in perpetual dialogue.

DANCING DREAMS, CONVERSATIONS AND DESIRE IN AND THEN...

One night I dreamt that I was standing in an open cockpit of an aeroplane in flight, whilst screaming instructions at two pilots who were experiencing challenging landings. Inexplicably, the wind did not stifle the volume of my voice and I remained secure in this precarious position as, somehow, my foot was hooked. The dream ends with an epiphany: build sufficient strength to hang from different body parts, especially the space between the big toe and the one next to it. This then became the impetus for a set of exercises where I extended my methodologies around attaining balance and strength from a segmented body.

Here, an arbitrary discussion held with my kinesiologist comes to mind, about the earthworm's segmented body and its cloacal system; organs that control and regulate the reproductive and excretory actions in the bodies of invertebrates. The cloaca is not present in humans; however, the ancient reflexes of the system remain and are evident in the synchronisation of the pelvis and the cranium. Laterally extending my thoughts around this cloacal absence led me to wonder whether my pre-human state might have some proximity with the earthworm's segmented form. Could I, like the earthworm, reproduce shapes and forms from segmented body parts? Further informing my thinking was a conversation I had with my daughter at two years old. Looking at my naked torso, she correlated breasts to eyes, the navel to a nose, and the vaginal region to a mouth. In terms of dance, this inversion of the body revealed innovative possibilities to me, and I began to mirror ways of manipulating the torso in the face, and vice-versa, thereby creating movement that was not replicating a traditional form. Rather, an authentic experience and construction of the body was crafted, whilst simultaneously honing new connective philosophies of the body.

Following on, to activate the individual segments of my body as a complete, whole structure *quodlibet*,¹¹ as it is, I combined the Butoh principle of seeing with multiple eyes. Starting with the head and then gradually moving down towards the neck, throat, shoulders, chest, rib-cage and further downwards towards the heels, I imagined looking with different intentions. For example, I would ask, how would the back of my neck see my navel? Would it catch a glimpse, stare, or possibly see with blurred vision? Responding to those questions through the body requires flexibility and a desire to stretch the body beyond its conventional abilities, behaviours and perceptions. In another exercise I would try to move body parts independently, as well as to find the interrelationship and variations of flow between joints, bones and muscles, all the while observing with multiple eyes, acutely aware of the ways in which weight was transferred and tension was held. Through the repetition of these and other exercises, I developed a juxtaposed, nuanced understanding of the body that was able to create a visual picture whilst focusing on the specific technical and psycho-

¹¹ Lelande de la Durantaye explains the philosopher Giorgio Agamben's use of this term as encountering something as it is. He describes it as seeing something independent from universal meaning. For more information, see De la Durantaye, 2009:162.

physical mechanisms that were required to manifest that image. Furthermore, I learnt that over and above the visceral sensations that these images produced for the audience, an artistic crafting of socio-political ideologies and philosophies was gradually being revealed. For example, in *And then...* emulating the shake, imbalance and uncertainty of the praying mantis, is technically supported by engaging different sources of strength and balance from within my body, as well as an imagination of the body that differs from what conventional dance training imposes. As opposed to concentrating on the muscles above the pelvic region to maintain balance whilst swaying on leg, I would imagine my armpits pushing down on invisible crutches, or feel as if I were balancing on a stick emanating from my heart towards the ground. In so doing, the image of vulnerability and difficulty expressed in performance is completely supported, though not shown in obvious ways.

These multiple modes of looking at the body in its parts works alongside the perpetual shaking employed in embodying the praying mantis. In spite of appearing vulnerable, an internal, hidden strength supports the body beyond conventional notions of dance. In its repeated doing, alternative probabilities of performance are glimpsed, which inform the next creative process. Moreover, its ongoing exploration brings awareness to the aporia of the indivisible yet distinct functionality of collaborating elements both inside and outside of the body. Similarly, *And then...* provokes thinking about Blackness philosophically. It is as if the work literally shakes up embedded configurations of identity and offers glimpses of the potential of perceiving vulnerability as an authentic place of power. Engaging with the qualities of vulnerability, instability and difficulty as a mode of potential rather than suffering, uncovers alternative ways of being which are not limited to socio-political configurations of race. An ongoing practice of looking into Blackness through the philoembodology of the praying mantis, leans into these qualities as being constitutive to understanding ourselves, and thus, a conscious strategy to expand self-knowledge beyond imposed racial tropes. In this way, *And then...* affords opportunities to be re-recognised¹² or known again, independent from homogenous narratives and ontologies both in performance and everyday constructions of identity.

In Butoh it is necessary to explore the unknown, and this world of the secret led me to think about desire in the conceptual design of *And then...* In particular sexual desires, which are often thought of as dissident, and therefore, enacted in the dark. My close collaborator in all the iterations of *And then...* is a classical pianist, José Dias. We both considered desire to be a yearning for something or someone that was absent but longed for energetically. The beginnings of our exploration coincided with a personal point of distress that I had to manage. In my family life, I felt unfairly accused of being selfish and in response, I decided to sink into the principle of *kintsugi*, the ancient Japanese craft of highlighting the imperfections of things ruptured or damaged, with gold. Butoh draws from *kintsugi* and thus, the idea of fixing or rectifying a mistake requires a deeper engagement with the point of error and in so doing, transforms the appearance of what was broken. In *And then...* we initially looked at how the

¹² The hyphenation here is to bring awareness to a different understanding of the word, where the actions of repetition and cognition are held.

female mantis eating the male after mating could be seen as a self-absorbed act. However, further investigation revealed that the female does not directly benefit from the ingested male. Rather, he serves as food for her growing mantids. The spectacle of her consuming the male thus serves as a valence for futurity, a prepossessing of the future, to borrow from the African literary scholar, Harry Garuba (2003:271). With re-imagining identity being the overarching theme of my research, I hoped that delving into a personal criticism would, in a similar fashion, reveal something new that was yet to be realised.

In rehearsals, reproducing the constant shake of the mantis generated a vibration which José¹³ and I understood to be a perpetually shifting movement of energies to which we had to pay constant attention. We applied this concept to material objects too. José acknowledged the piano as an entity with a past which held its own set of memories that could affect the performance in particular ways. He wondered what sounds could emanate if it were allowed to re-member¹⁴ its natural source. Employing this kind of imagination, he was able to create soundtracks of landscapes that moved from rustling leaves and forest floors to dry and dusty desert plains, with atmospheres ranging from winds and storms to slow and heavy waves of heat. I wondered how the praying mantis would teach me to move if I remembered its relation to the branch of a tree, and by extension, to the earth?

Answering these questions necessitated engaging with what is imagined, invisible, and though constructed by what could not be logically understood, viscerally felt. Moreover, to realise the work, José and I developed an intimacy by eating together and engaging in conversations that stretched from personal concerns to general observations of the world. We built our connection and feeling of each other's contexts, as well as a sensibility to anticipate and effectively respond to the multiple vibrational lines from which we proceed when we perform. We both imagine the physical performance space to be constituted from a myriad of criss-crossing elastic lines which vibrate at different frequencies. In performance, the movements of my dance and his playing disturb these lines and an ever-changing energetic field enabling a heightened awareness is created. With this in mind, we do not only hear with our ears or see with our eyes. Instead, we aim to develop a deep soul-attentiveness, and listen with instinct, in order to open from the inside and enable a synergy in performance that lives through the movement of breath; the beginning of being alive. Our performance, therefore, expresses a relationship that extends beyond the immediacy of that moment and is inevitably permeated by our pasts, alongside our individual sensations and actions, as well as the presence of other things. All of these simultaneously seep into the construction of *And then....*

AND THEN... PRACTISING TO BE ALIVE IN WORLDS

When collaborating with other performers, however, we needed to create shortcuts for them to meet us in our artistic philosophies and practice. As *And Then....* is largely fashioned

13 Breaking the academic convention of referring to people by their last name, I am using the first name to indicate our close relationship.

14 The hyphenation here is to evoke sensing memory through the repetitive actions of the members of the body, in order to recall different memories.

as a prepared improvisation, it is impossible to predict specific beats of the music or exact movements of my dance. Our process had to enable accompanying performers to incorporate what was predetermined and well-rehearsed, as well as maintain an openness to anticipate and confidently respond to unexpected nuances in sequences. This required the relinquishing of notions they may have held of their performer selves and, instead, risk seeing themselves differently by offering a willingness to be alive in performance.

The 2018 iteration always started with a psychophysical focus that set the tone for commitment and an intimacy in the rehearsal process. To help the accompanying dancer with expressing the awkward and arhythmic dynamics associated with desire, José and I shared excerpts of André Aciman's book, *Call me by your name* (2017) with them. The concept could thus shift into a world of fiction and psychologically release the dancer from the responsibility of realising a narrative in which they might have felt objectified. One exercise focused on growing our sense of interconnectivity. There, one person would inhale and on the exhalation, gently place the palm of their hand on a body part of a co-performer. The one being touched would inhale in response and on the exhalation find a gentle movement towards or away from the touch. They would then inhale and place their hand on another body part, and exhale. Gradually, the one being touched would speak and say, "I desire you", to which the one touching would respond, "You desire me". The ritualistic repetition of these focus sessions prior to determining the details of scenes and sequences, developed organic techniques in balancing notions of truth and lies, which in my opinion, aid in sustaining a compelling performance.

The ellipsis in the show's title indicates an ongoing narrative where the next step is always a response to the dynamics of change stemming from the previous performance and everyday life. In this work, the continuum of life and death has to repeatedly play out. The 2018 iteration, however, was mimetic, as I consumed the dancer, but failed to embody the darker nuances of desire that required an end; a death, in order to begin again. Fortuitously, shortly after the 2018 performances, we experienced a big thunderstorm in Cape Town and gale force winds blew over a few trees in the vicinity of my office. Instinctually, I dragged the broken, lichen-covered branches into my workspace, feeling that somehow, they would be incorporated in the next version of *And Then...* I remained undecided whether to include the dancer of the first version, or not, but made the offer nonetheless. The dancer declined my invitation and thereby brought that version of the work to an end. Thus, I began to dream a new show that incorporated many performers, crossing and re-crossing a landscape evoking images of new beginnings and unpreventable change. The trees that I had carried into my office several weeks before, became my subtextual symbol of life, death and life again, and were suspended at asymmetrical points in the auditorium. In terms of the concept underpinning *And then...*, the branches seemed to mirror the stick-like form of the praying mantis whilst simultaneously evoking a sense of the gravitas of age. This also matched José's aforementioned claim that the piano itself remembers that it once was a tree.

For this 2019 version I chose to work with two acting students and a professional opera singer. In the interim, we worked with the concept of desire, which, in order to enact, requires a level of control; this evolved into our considering desire's coexistence with compassion, which relinquishes control and is moved by the other. Prior to beginning the

rehearsal period, I led the performers through an intensive workshop around embodying these ideas. I created a processual exercise that began with their looking into the pupils of the other in order to see their own reflection. This progressed to observing one performer falling and, rather than catching them and preventing the fall, the focus was on responding to details of the fall, and allowing it to happen in the most organic and gentle manner.

SEEING AND FALLING

Western aesthetics emphasise the importance of dancers remaining balanced and in full control of their bodies. With a key principle of improvisation being the willingness to explore and engage with what has not been pre-determined and is thus unknown, how can a dancer develop the ability to relinquish control and allow themselves to be moved by the other? The following exercise holds 4 parts that gradually increase in complexity. The work begins with the individual experience, progresses to a group exercise and ends with modes of reflection. Notions of observation and response are key principles of this exercise.

Part 1

Step 1: Each individual stands directly in front of a mirror and looks into their own eyes.

Step 2: Intermittently, close and open the eyes. Mention the importance of observing without judgement. Allow the exercise to continue for at least 10 minutes before repeating or progressing.

Part 2

Step 1: Place participants in partners standing across each other with a distance of approximately 2 metres between them.

Step 2: Each individual looks into the eyes of their partner.

Step 3: Whilst maintaining their focus on the eyes of the other, each individual gradually takes a step towards their partner until they are standing directly in front of each other, face-to-face. Throughout, mention the importance of consciously exhaling. Continue to close and open the eyes intermittently. Allow the exercise to continue for at least 10 minutes before repeating or switching partners.

Part 3

Step 1: Place participants in a circle with one individual standing in the centre.

Step 2: The individual placed in the centre closes their eyes and slowly allows their body parts to give in to gravity and fall to the floor. Mention the importance of consciously exhaling.

Step 3: The individuals standing in the circle respond by finding ways to gently suspend and/or support the fall of the one in the centre. It is important that they do not attempt to prevent the fall. Rather, the objective is to use their body parts to momentarily facilitate an independent descent of the one in the centre.

Step 5: The exercise ends when the entire body of the individual standing in the centre arrives on the floor.

Step 6: Repeat, allowing each individual to experience falling in the centre.

Part 4

Step 1: With the aim of replicating the emotional, physical and psychological sensations felt in the body, simultaneously, have each participant move across the floor freely.

Step 2: Allow each individual to document their feelings and thoughts in writing.

Step 3: As a group, discuss the challenges, discoveries and technical ways of replicating the experience.

In addition, to maintain a sense of aliveness in performance, I repeated a technique applied in the previous version.

I choreographed sequences, but in performing, deliberately left the rhythmic structure of singular parts within the sequence to my independent discretion. In this way, even though the performers knew the overall sequence, the exact moment of change remained unpredictable and demanded their constant attention. To explain: imagine a dance sequence composed of two bodies approaching each other in a walk. They enact a series of movements with their hands and arms and conclude the sequence with one body being lifted by the other. In performing this sequence in *And then...*, the beginning and end parts would remain stable, but in between, I would lengthen, thicken or alter the movements with pauses, falls or jumps. This choreographic choice could be likened to *typoglycemia*, where words are scrambled, yet the brain still recognises a pattern and can comprehend meaning. Similarly, in a duet, the performer would recognise the beginning of a combination, but would have to remain in a state of anticipation, watching my constant shaking, waiting for me to arrive at the pre-determined movement set at the end of that section, before being able to progress to the next movement. Their body thus remained alive and ready to appropriately respond to vibrational changes. In this way I built a technique in shaping, manipulating and fixing their movements so that it could be iterable. Thus, my collaborators contributed to my ongoing search for reimagining identity and modifying ways of being through an awareness of what is different, difficult, other or strange.

Since 2020, *And Then...* has contracted to its core investigators: the piano, José and myself. We believe that this triad remains in an ongoing relational adjustment, each holding the desire to break the physical barriers we have between each other as things, as human beings, as essences, and as entities that perpetually dissolve into each other. In 2020 a 23-minute dance film was created, and, since 2021, new 80-minute iterations have been developed annually. Currently, our performances express a sensibility to the natural environment of the performance location. Processes prior to the performance might therefore require rehearsing in the desert, attempting to embody its heat, monotone and sparse flora and fauna.



Video 4.1: *And then...* dance film. Conceived, directed and produced by jackī job – [here](#). Video production by Steve van Zyl productions.

CONCLUSION

Ohno Kazuo¹⁵ reminds us that “dance is nurtured by our lives, not our techniques” (Ohno & Ohno, 2004:282), and *And then...* is always supported by subtextual information discovered in everyday situations. In this way, dance becomes a means to confront and not to escape from the world.

For me, the value of PaR methodologies is underscored by the close correlation between my practice and everyday life. Over the years, an increased sensibility of animist embodiment has brought an awareness of performance as a process that perpetually modifies ways of being. Reimagining identity beyond humancentric configurations has developed a psyche that desires to look beneath the surface of things. It has cultivated an attitude that expands life from sheer functionality to living through conscious, embodied, relational experiences. Moreover, it has animated the belief that transformation necessitates refocusing one’s attention onto what remains difficult, different, strange and unknown, as places of resistance and power.

With each iteration, the vibration of the praying mantis has revealed flashes of a secret that promises new modes of living alongside what may be unforeseen in life, and a willingness to be moved by other things. With an inhalation, my heart swells and rises upwards. Exhalation, and my heart gently settles back whilst my head drops to meet it. At the places of pause, somewhere in-between instinct and intellect, something changes, and I follow. And then, who knows what might happen next?



Figure 4.1: jackī job in *And then...* 2018. Photograph by Rob Keith.

15 Written in the Japanese way with the last name appearing first.



Figure 4.2: jacki job in *And then...* 2019. Photograph by Rob Keith.



Figure 4.3: jacki job in *And then...* 2020. Photograph by Rob Keith.

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