

Private Lives in Public Places— Oral Histories of Performing Artists: How Much Do You Really Want to Know?

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ABSTRACT. This article is an exploration of oral history practice within the context of a performing arts archive. It addresses the deceptively simple question of what oral historians should actually ask their respondents and, ultimately, how much do we, as researchers, really want to know. The use of oral history material is discussed from a historical point of view in relation to archival collecting and the needs of scholars and researchers. The notion that oral history practice must both respond to and transcend this history is set forward. The article concludes by advocating an expansive approach to oral history as a means to more fully understand and preserve our pasts. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2004 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

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I'd like to begin by confessing my essential confusion about the existence of history. We know that certain events occurred in the past, or we think we know, or perhaps we thought we knew when we read those authoritative looking high school textbooks. What I have come to realize, however, in part through the study and practice of oral history, is that the truth, if it does exist at all, is made up of many truths. And this is as much the case with the war in Iraq, as with the life history of an individual.

Over the last century, there has been much debate over the study of history and what it should entail. Paul Thompson, a British historian, and great advocate of oral history, lauds this method of documentation because it brings us back "from the grand patterns of written history to the awkwardly individual human lives which are its basis."¹ No one could argue that at this point in American life we don't pay a great deal of attention to awkward individual lives. Indeed, we glorify them. Today, the private lives of celebrities and politicians are considered news, and the most personal aspects of the lives of ordinary citizens are mass marketed as entertainment.

It seems to me however that the very popularity of this trend has made many scholars wary and apologetic when bringing the so-called private self into their most in-depth and serious historical studies. Perhaps too much so. I have coordinated the Dance Oral History Project at New York Public Library for the Performing Arts for nearly ten years and while at first it appeared a fairly straight-forward task, to document a life through interviews, this issue, among others, has rendered it, for me, increasingly complex. For the purpose of this article, I will address what I see as a blurry distinction between the public and private self, with particular respect to oral histories of performing artists.

Oral history as a modern organized activity is said to date only to 1948, when Allan Nevins began the now highly respected program at Columbia University. Since that time the field has grown enormously. Today, oral history programs exist at libraries, museums, historical centers, universities and schools and they have become, like many other areas of intellectual pursuit, increasingly self conscious. Yearly meetings of the national Oral History Association and the growth of regional and specialised groups have given practitioners of oral history a forum to examine the work they are doing under the light of their colleagues' scrutiny. One very positive consequence of this collective search for identity and respectability was the publication in 1968 of the *Oral History Association's Goals and Guidelines*. Over the years the *Guidelines*

have evolved and become more detailed, now commenting on virtually every aspect of oral history practice.²

In my first years with the Dance Oral History Project, I tended to focus on ensuring that we were following these national standards, indeed that I knew what the standards were. But I was thinking more about the craft of oral history than the art: Do we have a donor statement? Do we preserve our tapes and transcripts? Do we index sufficiently and create usable, accessible artifacts? More recently, however, I find myself caught up in questions that I would describe as residing in the realm of art. For example, the more I interview the more I am confused by the deceptively straightforward problem of what to actually ask the people we are interviewing. The Oral History Association guidelines on matter such as this, given the broad scope of oral history practice, are blessedly open-ended. I quote, "Interviewers should fully explore all appropriate areas of inquiry with the interviewee and not be satisfied with superficial responses."

Well, what *are* the appropriate areas of inquiry for an oral history of a performing artist? Or, in fact, any public figure? How deeply should we delve into the lives of our subjects? Where do we begin our questioning and where does it end? Do our legitimate interests stop at the bedroom door? What about the bathroom door? Perhaps our inquiries should never leave the studio or for that matter, the stage at all? These questions strike me as particularly relevant for professional archival organizations because the answers have important implications, not only for oral historians, but also for archivists and librarians as well.

I recently did an informal survey, asking choreographers and scholars whether they were curious about the private lives of artists or other public figures, as well as how far *they* felt an oral history interview should go in exploring a choreographer or dancer's private life. The majority of my respondents claimed not to be interested in knowing about this private domain, judging it to be the realm of mere gossip. They associated such topics with tabloid journalism, I think, and judged it inappropriate for a more serious analysis of the art. Hmm, I wondered, set this same group of people free with the manuscript papers of a particular choreographer, say George Balanchine, would they really be more interested in the lighting plots and choreographic notes of his work, or would it be the correspondence and diaries, the fascinating and messy mix of head and heart that gets them charged up?

That material is compelling *in part* because it is privileged. The very fact that it was probably not intended for public consumption gives it authenticity and the reader gains access to a particular quality of truth that is

missing from secondary or more impersonal sources. We may also learn about a myriad of facets of our subject's lives, which are both related, and seemingly unrelated to their art. We will certainly learn about how our subject related to the world, and most likely about that world itself.

It is in fact partly due to my experience with manuscript collections that I suggest that although dance *is* the subject matter of our project, there *are* many things worth studying other than the dances themselves. A future scholar may look to our interviews, for example, not to better understand an individual artist's work, but as part of a comparative study of artistic process. Or a contemporary choreographer may wish to know about another artist, not just about their work, but also about how they survive economically, find rehearsal space, pay their dancers, train their bodies, get produced, have a relationship, or in one of the greatest mysteries of all for women dancers, have children.

Additionally, as historians and preservationists, we can not afford to document performing artists only in terms of what is fashionable in current circles of art or performance theory. That fashion may totally change 50 or 100 years hence. For example, during one era, or in one part of the world, a theorist may decide that it is only what is on the page or the stage that matters, while at another time and place, economic or social factors might be considered relevant. The related and quite profound question of, "who is history by and for," is one that archives and archivists face all the time as they choose which collections should be collected, processed and why.

It also strikes me as important to think about the fact that there may come a time when archivists begin to see fewer collections that actually include diaries and correspondence. What, in fact, if such materials no longer existed, or were disappearing? Well, welcome to 2003. That time has come. We are certainly in an age of diminished correspondence, a time in which the telephone, the computer and the rapid pace of life make it less likely that artists will leave behind substantial personal papers, diaries, or letters. Oral histories may offer a unique opportunity to capture a similar type of primary information that would otherwise be lost. Such responsibilities make it all the more important for the interviewer to have thought deeply about that basic question, "How much do we really want to know?"

It is useful at this point to remember that modern oral history grew out of a desire for something more than the official story. And the Dance Oral History Project of New York Public Library (now more than 25 years old), grew out of the fact that the official story for dance had never even been written. Scholarship and publishing in dance is relatively

new. Even the collecting of dance manuscript material is a recent and comparatively limited practice. And not coincidentally, of all the arts, dance is the most ephemeral. It literally does not exist other than in the moment of performance. These facts coupled with dance's marginalised social and cultural status and essential oral tradition—it is passed from choreographer to dancer or dancer to dancer through the spoken word, rather than notes or symbols on a page—make it an ideal subject to explore through interview.

The relationship between a dance and the choreographer's personal experiences as revealed in an interview may be overt and clear, or obscure and hard to fathom. I would suggest, however, that in the case of any living choreographer, to judge it as irrelevant would be premature. And the personal realm is, of course, not limited to the practical elements of how the artist chooses to live, but also may be understood to include what they read, what art they are drawn to, how they compose, or, if the interview is about a third person, what that person is like to work with.

The vitality, indeed, the necessity, of exploring such topics is also highlighted by what many have observed as the dissolution of local and national communities in an increasingly globalised culture. In this changing world, so well described in sociologist Robert Putnam's best-selling book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, we see that many individuals may have lost some of the social frameworks that once governed their lives.³ The performing artist/researcher I mentioned a moment ago is no exception. She no longer follows a well-trod path to achieve her goals. In fact, for many performing artists, the goals themselves have *never* been simple or clear. And they are certainly less so today when our government has called into question the national role of the arts in its effort, for example, to abolish the National Endowment for the Arts.

Libraries, and even oral history projects, can offer an opportunity to connect to one's own community; and the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, as a specialized research center, is uniquely situated in this capacity. The interviews we record and the ways that they are used in books, articles, documentaries and performance pieces often seem to respond to the artist's or scholar's need to connect, on a very personal level, to the material certainly, but also to its creators, or to the field in general.

Here is an example. David Gordon, a highly regarded postmodern choreographer, recently completed a dance titled, *Private Lives of Dancers*. In this work, the dancers combine movement with a very realistic dis-

cussion of the ordinary details of their lives. Mr. Gordon came to the oral history project wanting to hear couples who dance discuss the nature of their creative work together. We actually were able to help him and he listened to numerous interviews. Mr. Gordon himself is married to dancer Valda Setterfield, and their creative careers have been a well-established collaborative effort. He listened to our interviews as part of his creative process and ultimately chose a few of them to include in the sound score of the dance. How interesting it was to me that he wanted to read about how others worked out *their* creative partnerships and then use what he found as mirror, inspiration, and as art.

A very different, but related example is an article I recently read by Larissa MacFarquhar in the *New Yorker* magazine about Noam Chomsky.⁴ A long and well-written piece, primarily about Chomsky's intellectual contribution, it was, at times, quite dense and difficult to digest. At a certain point in the piece, however, there was a short section on Chomsky's home life and his relationship with his wife and children, even what he likes to watch on television. Was it irrelevant? Some might say so. But for me it opened a door. From that moment on I felt that I had access to this man; the ideas were more than abstractions. As I continued to read, some of the most complex material revealed itself with a new clarity. While MacFarquhar works under the guise of journalism, her broad and complex rendering of her subject seems informed by the best aspects of oral history practice. And *as* with great oral history interviews, her article contained material that I didn't know I needed to know . . . until I did.

Ultimately, my views on the expansive content of oral history are colored by the fact that I work in the largest performing arts library in the world. I see the range of material that is collected and I think a lot about what is missing, what we don't have, or won't have, and what we might like to learn and think about in the future. Certain truths are only revealed to those who have direct contact to the subject herself or to those who knew her. Oral history offers a unique opportunity to fill this gap. Perhaps this is simply an argument for the relevance of oral history as a documentary process, but it is also, I think, a reminder of the breadth and depth of materials to which archivists are entrusted and the researcher may require.

Practicing oral history has helped me realize what many historians of the 20th century have concluded—history is much more than the actions of generals and the pronouncements of presidents. Similarly, dance today is not just the fruit of a handful of choreographers and the innovative works that they created in a vacuum. It, too, arises out of the complexity of millions of lives. An interesting angle on these lives came

from one respondent to my survey. When asked, “Are you curious about the private lives of artists or other public figures? Why or why not?” Monica Moseley, a former dancer with Meredith Monk, told me, “Of course. For most people, the private dances of courtship and consummation are the truth of their lives.” When oral histories delve responsibly beyond the surface of their subject’s lives, they offer a valid response to those that would put these lives up for sale, or forget them entirely.

NOTES

1. Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past* 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, p.12.
2. For an up to date version of these guidelines log onto the Oral History Association web page: <http://omega.dickinson.edu/organizations/oha/EvaluationGuidelines.html>.
3. Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and revival of American Community*. Simon and Schuster, 2000.
4. Larissa MacFarquhar, “The Devil’s Accountant,” *The New Yorker* 79:6 (2003): 64-79.

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