

Yvonne Rainer interviewed by Laura Diffenderfer

Laura Diffenderfer: So, I am hoping you can tell me a little bit about the creation of *ROS indexical*—how the piece came about, and what the process of creating it was.

Yvonne Rainer: It came about when I was in England and I saw a film by the BBC a friend of mine had recorded off of the TV, called *Riot at the Rite*, which was a dramatization of the making of the *Rite of Spring*. It ends with the famous—or infamous—performance on May 29, 1913 of the [Vaslav Nijinsky] ballet reconstructed by Millicent Hodson and performed by the Finnish National Ballet. They cut between the stage and the audience, which is rioting and making all this fuss. I was very turned on by this soundtrack and I thought, wouldn't it be great to do a *Rite of Spring* invoking that response of the audience along with the Stravinsky orchestration? So, that was the germinating moment for me. And then I had these four dancers [Emily Coates, Pat Catterson, Patricia Hoffbauer, and Sally Silvers] from last year who were waiting and eager to do something new with me—I had made a version of Balanchine's *Agon* in 2006 [with them].

Then RoseLee Goldberg's Performa came up and she invited me to do something, so it worked out timing-wise: two summers. I can only work with the dancers in the summer because of their schedules and the fact that I am on the west coast now, which makes it a very cumbersome process because they have to relearn everything they learned the previous year. The first summer, 2006, we did half of it and then in the spring I think I was here for a bit and we rehearsed it again. And this last summer 2007, I finished it. So, the dancers' contribution is very important to this process—contributions, I should say—in so far as I am using source material that doesn't come out of my body. For the most part, I am not composing on their bodies, either. We made use of the Hodson material, but also tapes from 1911—films of Sarah Bernhardt—and an HBO special of Robin Williams. I assign the dancers various parts of these tapes and they go away and learn the stuff, and I stage it. That's pretty much the process.

Laura: And how did you land on—because those are really different sources to pull material from— a Robin Williams stand up routine and a Sarah Bernhardt film?

Yvonne: I had seen a Sarah Bernhardt show at the Jewish museum a couple of years ago and the films were part of the exhibition. I was just very enamored of her gestures and her comportment and I thought that would be interesting material for a dance. One day Sally Silvers brought in a tape of Robin Williams, which she had recorded. She had thought, well, there's too much Sarah Bernhardt and [that] we needed something else. She has the same sensibility, in a way, that I do. I looked at these two hours and assigned Patricia Hoffbauer and Sally this material. Meanwhile, Pat Catterson had memorized about 40 minutes of Sarah Bernhardt at the get go, and unfortunately I hadn't videotaped it, so she had to relearn all that stuff a year later, and she taught that to the others. And Patricia taught a lot of the Robin Williams stuff to Emily. So, it went like that and I began to insert this material into the flow.

Laura: And in terms of the Millicent Hodson reconstruction—obviously no one knows exactly what Nijinsky did. They looked at his notes, is that correct?

Yvonne: She worked on this for seven years in the 1980s.

Laura: This was [Nijinsky's] daughter?

Yvonne: Who?

Laura: Wasn't there a woman involved?

Yvonne: Nijinsky's assistant, Marie Rambert, who later formed her own ballet company, was his assistant and had danced in the piece. She had squirreled away the score—the Stravinsky score—with her notes on it. Hodson interviewed her, but she had no idea where in her house this was. It had disappeared. I think maybe it was a photocopy. And then when she died, her assistant found it in a cupboard somewhere, and gave the material to Hodson. So, Hodson published the score with the notes. This was one of her main resources. But still, I just read that when she was reconstructing *Rite* for the Joffrey Ballet in 1987, there were parts where she had no way of knowing what the material was, and her preference was for the dancers to stand still for that duration.

Laura: Like a blank page, sort of, and then picking up again.

Yvonne: Yeah, yeah, [indicating] this is where we don't know what happened.

Laura: That's interesting.

Yvonne: 'We can't even speculate.' And Joffrey would not have it. I guess that was really too far out for him. That would have been very interesting.

Laura: It would have been because perhaps it would have made the audience angry in a similar way as the original.

Yvonne: Or it would have been a more genuine research project, a scholarly project, but he wanted a complete theatrical event. So, I don't know where those points are in the dance. Anyway, for me the blank parts were where the camera in the BBC version cut away from the stage, which created the same kind of problem, in a way: What were we going to do at these moments?

Laura: And?

Yvonne: I was adapting it for four women from 46 performers, so already I was selecting and accommodating and making my own thing. But then the camera cut away and we could only imagine and so there I would insert some of my own stuff. There is even a little passage where they do some *Agon*, footwork which you can identify if you are familiar with that dance. And then by the second half, I just departed from the score, the music, and the Hodson reconstruction altogether and it becomes more like a pastiche of Nijinsky, Bernhardt, Williams, Rainer...

Laura: Indexing.

Yvonne: Right, exactly. There is even a little *Trio A* in it.

Laura: And what is your interest in indexing all these other things and engaging with history in this way—reaching back? Obviously, [Nijinsky's *Rite*] was such an exciting moment for dance history. I think, the first time I heard the story of what happened—It's just a fabulous story, and it's so exciting. It makes dance seem as important as we all feel that it is, you know?

Yvonne: It had a real effect on people. I've been interested in these—what I call and what scholars have called—moments of rupture in an aesthetic continuum. In the visual arts there is Dada and the Futurists and Kokoschka in Vienna, the experiments of the Secessionists and all that. So, 1913, Diaghilev and this dance is another one of these moments where music and ballet traditions were instantly challenged. And it's just an electrifying moment. So, many people have done work—dancing and writing—on this moment, it's amazing. I'm sure by now Pina Bausch, Béjart, The Joffrey, I think Michael Clark has just done one. I mean we're all enamored of that music and that moment. So, in a way, the BBC soundtrack offered a way of approaching it in

terms of its being lost to memory—approaching it as failure, a failure of memory, right? We can't remember so we have to go at it in some totally different way, perhaps even in a somewhat satiric way. You know, "I can't remember this, so I'll do something totally inappropriate." So, [using] the Williams material especially—this obscene genius—was a way of stating the impossibility of authenticity through impropriety and so forth. That kind of thing has always interested me.

Laura: Well, it's interesting because in my mind, you can draw a connection between what Nijinsky did in 1913 and what you guys were doing in the 1960s at Judson Church—I mean radically reinventing the way that we think about dance. Do you feel a sort of kinship with [Nijinsky] and his interest in rethinking and provoking?

Yvonne: Yes, but on the other hand the whole tribal narrative—the prehistoric ritualistic aspect—is something that I think is very questionable. Nikolai Roerich, who collaborated with Nijinsky and Stravinsky and was an artist and a kind of self-made anthropologist or ethnographer, had suggested this myth of the virgin who dances herself to death as a sacrifice to bring on spring. That is totally imaginary and has nothing to do with history. That aspect of the dance was not something that interested me, and yet, I felt I had to refer to it in some oblique way. So, another strategy in the dance is in the set design. Half way through, these words come down on double-sided banners. They unfurl and bounce around and twist. The words range from the banal to the topically charged, like "terror," "lunch," "decay," "if not now, when?" "who? me?" "sofa," etc.

Laura: Sofa. And there is a sofa.

Yvonne: And there is a sofa, yes, that the dancers retreat to when I didn't know what to do with them. [laughter] So, the banners add another layer of commentary to the anthropological or ethnographic aspect of the original dance.

Laura: When I first saw the Robin Williams movement, I didn't know that it was Robin Williams, and I read it as sort of a criticism of this macho, sort of angry, arrogant behavior, and I thought about war, and about our current situation. That was one of the major things that I walked away from the piece thinking about and I just wondered what you thought about that and—this is sort of a long question—about appropriation in general—this possibility that you take these movements, these segments, and then they become something else, and have a totally other impact than the original moment. And then also the idea that you can take something more emotionally charged, like the Sarah Bernhardt that becomes sort of campy in a way, and abstracted from emotion. I am wondering about your interest in appropriation and what is exciting to you about it.

Yvonne: Well, let's take a specific bit of material—the Sarah Bernhardt—that is all about the way to convey emotion through a particular style. This was a very recognizable and appreciated style then. Today, it seems overblown. But what interests me is—and I didn't know it would have this affect on me—when Bernhardt did it, it was the Racine plays and the drama that produced the gestures; it was the emotion that produced the gestures. And now when I see someone like Pat Catterson do it, I realize that it's the replication of the gestures that produces the emotion.

Laura: A way of reaching back.

Yvonne: And the dancers don't approach it like, 'I am going to express emotion'. But, 'I am going to do those exact gestures' and in so doing, produce this unexpected result. I found myself being strangely moved when Pat, especially, who is extremely precise, executes those gestures. So, I am interested in a whole range of affect in a given piece. All of my work contains these incommensurate pieces of material. In my teaching, I am always trying to get my students to think not of singularity or unity. They may have two projects that seem very different. What happens when you try to get these two projects together? You can always find a connection, a temporal flow or a formal connection, or even a semiotic connection. So, the Williams and the Bernhardt don't seem that inappropriate in this situation. Especially since the music is so bombastic—the violence—as you say. I was surprised to hear you say that you thought of our current situation

when you saw the Robin Williams. But it's true, his gestures are very aggressive, even violent. So when these two things happen at the same time—there are particular moments when you are seeing them at the same time—I hope that there is a—I cannot predict the effect on the audience—but, I myself am thrilled when I see these materials...

Laura and Yvonne: Together.

Yvonne: Simultaneously. [laughter]

Laura: But, using words like terror adds that other layer. Is [politics] something that you think about with this piece?

Yvonne: How is it political? How is dancing political?

Laura: Yes.

Yvonne: Well, at Judson it was about formal or aesthetic politics—a revolt against our predecessors, you know: the Graham grandiose narratives, even Cunningham's formality and balletic vocabulary, or the technical requirement to do that kind of work. There was this attitude of a refusal to dance in any traditional sense, which Trisha Brown, in retrospect, felt very confined by, but I felt it was a freedom to do anything—to do quirky movement, to do other kinds of dancing whether the critics thought it was dancing or not. I always thought we were opening the palace gates of high art, which was happening all around us, in the 60s in other disciplines, not only in dance.

Laura: Right.

Yvonne: So, to introduce Robin Williams into a dance at this late date—I mean I don't think anyone would contest its validity as dance. I think what he is doing is a very particular kind of movement that you can call dance, just as forty years ago we called ourselves dancers when we walked and ran.

Laura: Absolutely. And I'm sure it's choreographed, in a way.

Yvonne: Well, it's pretty spontaneous. It's different every time. But, his imagination—he's a free-associator.

Laura: An improviser!

Yvonne: He's an improviser, yes. You never know what's going to come out. I guess by this time he has a repertory of moves centering around his crotch. Also, to see women doing moves that men usually do. In *Agon*, the women partnering the ballerina—the quartet at the beginning—I guess this is a political thing. Emily, who danced with the New York City Ballet, had a friend who we thought was going to replace her because we thought she wasn't going to be able to go on a particular tour. This friend, who also danced in New York City Ballet years ago, said the women in the company always wanted to do what the men did, right? But, they couldn't. They weren't allowed. They had to go on point and lift their legs up to their ears. And the men could do a much greater variety of things. And, so, that was one of my ideas at Judson—that women could lift men.

Laura: Egalitarian movement.

Yvonne: Yes.

Laura: It also has this feeling for me of this sort of tribe of women where the rules are different somehow than real life, and I am interested in this theme—this idea that your work isn't

necessarily about form or a sort of narrative, but about ideology, about something bigger, a sort of reinvention of the society we live in. It's a feeling I get when I read about and see your work. Do you approach [your work] as an intellectual task, or do you begin with feeling and end up with something that becomes a thought? How does it happen that your work gets read so politically, and becomes so political, whereas there are so many choreographers that don't work in that way?

Yvonne: You mean they start with a theme.

Laura: Or that it's just not really about [politics]. It's simply about the moving body, or...

Yvonne: Well, I can talk about how I worked... I started with the soundtrack for *ROS*, I didn't start with movement. And then we just started appropriating bits of the reconstruction and I knew I would depart from it. I mean, there are certain things held over from my early days, like the dancers never leave the stage. When they are not dancing they look at those who are dancing. The enactment of casual behavior is something I've always been interested in. I'm beginning to think about a new piece and it came from seeing a Harun Farocki installation, at Documenta this summer, which is all about soccer. It's a multi-screen installation that ranged from commentators to a wide shot of what I think was the German/Italian World Cup to Laban notation of the moves of the players at a certain point...

Laura: Oh, interesting.

Yvonne: ...to a close-up of particular players. And I know nothing about soccer, and I almost passed this installation by because I am not interested in soccer. But, I saw Harun Farocki's name, and he's a very important video artist, so I went back. And there were these tapes of these guys who were doing next to nothing. You couldn't tell what their role was—I mean, their role obviously was to keep their eye on the ball and look around and walk—so, there are these moves that are plain vague. And I was transfixed by watching this casual behavior with gestures of the face, and turning the head, and I could just see a number of dancers doing this movement.

Laura: When you returned to dance, it was a certain political moment. I was wondering if you felt in any way that the return was necessary. Is there a reason you wanted to return to working with the live body as opposed to film.

Yvonne: Well, film—feature length films were finished for me—I couldn't raise that kind of money any more. And I have always been more comfortable working with dancers than making films, which require this big production. I always felt I was the dog being wagged by the tail—not in control of the process. And I'm a technophobe.

Laura: Me too.

Yvonne: I had written poetry for a year, and I wasn't sure what I was going to do. So, when the commission came [from White Oak], it was at a time when—unbeknownst even to me—I was ready. What I did, in that case, was appropriate my own work. I went back and every bit of material I could revive—with Pat Catterson's help—I re-organized for a new work for six dancers. *After Many A Summer, Dies The Swan*, it was called. So, that just felt right. I love working with dancers.

Laura: Do you have any feelings about the live body on stage? There is a difference, obviously, between working with a live body and seeing a live body on stage, than working with other materials that are not human, or ending up with a product that's not right there, in front of you.

Yvonne: Well, film is a product that is right in front of you once it's completed. You don't have to worry about it while you're watching it (unless the projector breaks down). And it's very enthralling. I love film. And I love aspects of the production of film—writing the script and the

editing, where you are alone again and you are in control of the materials. That was something that kept me going in the process. But with every new film it was like starting over again—finding crew, raising money. That couldn't go on forever. Nothing can go on forever. I knew *MURDER and murder* in 1996 was going to be my last. Since then I did make a video using dance and text, but that was a different kind of project from the feature films.

Laura: So, what about working with the live body in dance?

Yvonne: Well [with dance] you see what you've made right on the spot, and with film you don't see until it's come out of the lab. Of course, now people have a video monitor you can see right away, but I never had the money or the time to set that up, so... the material came back from the lab and they had botched it, or it was out of focus, and you didn't have the money to go back and re-shoot it. With live bodies, you see what you have immediately. But, that's only one part of it. There are Hollywood directors who rehearse for a long time with their actors, but that's unusual. It means they have big budgets. I never had that, so I didn't have that luxury. It's very luxurious to be able to work every day for two months as the commissions enabled [me to]. There is an economic side to it that not many choreographers are privileged to experience, which is a big shame and indicative of the dismal state of arts funding in this country. So, the whole process has been different this time—more satisfying.

Laura: So, you're going to stick with dance.

Yvonne: Well, at least one more.