

Yvonne Rainer

Talking with Clarinda Mac Low

Clarinda Mac Low: I mostly just want you to talk. Is there anything you want to say before I ask any questions?

Yvonne Rainer: No.

CML: I was interested in the title *AG Indexical, with a little help from H.M.* because...

YR: "H" period "M" period.

CML: Ok, that's important.

YR: and the AG doesn't have any periods.

CML: Ok. And now the question is: the title and what I watched during your rehearsal gave me two similar feelings which is that there's a lot of information contained within them. I feel like there's all this information alluded to that I don't know, but that I can sense. Also, within the dance, I felt that there was a lot of information packed into each moment, so I was curious about what the title is for you and if that sense of information is part of it.

YR: Well, originally it was *Agon indexical, with a little help from H.M.*, and I wanted to make it a little more mysterious, especially since it was at a point where I hadn't obtained permission for anything I used. I think DTW is getting Stravinsky permissions, and I've obtained permission from the Balanchine Trust to use the video, which you didn't see.

CML: Right.

YR: So, then I thought, "Ok, even though it will become obvious, I'll just use these abbreviations." I don't know why I hit on "AG", rather than "A" *Indexical*. Of course *Indexical* refers to the traces of *Agon*.

CML: Oh, I see.

YR: The way the term is used in art theoretical writing.

CML: Oh, traces of the actual concept.

YR: Traces of the original, the original dance.

CML: The original dance by Balanchine?

YR: Yeah, 1957.

CML: Ok. So, 1957 *Agon*, and the piece of Stravinsky is also...

YR: They collaborated. The ballet and music were choreographed and composed in the same year.

CML: So, its traces in art theory?

YR: It's pretty straightforward, the way an index contains references to what's in the book. So my AG contains all these references to Mr. B's *Agon*.

CML: What's "H.M."?

YR: Henri Mancini.

CML: Of course.

YR: The Pink Panther.

CML: So, tell me more about how it formed for you, why you chose that particular piece, and how the dance then...

YR: The whole project, *Sourcing Stravinsky*, was the idea of Annie-B Parson, and she invited these particular five artists to do work around something of their choosing by Stravinsky. Since *Agon* was always one of my favorite Balanchine/Stravinsky collaborations, I chose that. I didn't know what I would do with it, but Pat Catterson and I—of course, Pat has worked with me on previous dances, and she studied with me thirty-five years ago, and we've kept in touch, and she continues to perform and teach *Trio A* and *Chair Pillow*. So, Pat and I went up to the Performing Arts Library and looked at a video of the Harlem Ballet doing *Agon*, probably in the 1980s. We looked at various parts and kept rewinding it to the first men's quartet. The dance is for 8 women and 4 men. It opens with 4 men dancing in unison or in canon, and Pat, who is very musical and a very quick study said, "I can do that, I can do that." So, she learned the whole first quartet.

I went away to the Getty — where I was in residence a year ago, in 2005, for three months, as a scholar at the Getty Research Institute—and I worked on parts of the dance with Taisha Pagett, who had worked with me the year before in a revival of some dances that the Getty also produced in a program I shared with Simone Forti. Taisha was getting her MFA at UCLA World Arts and Culture,

and we worked a few times a week. Meanwhile, Pat had gotten the Stravinsky score, was studying that, and I had obtained this 1982 version of New York City Ballet doing *Agon* and sent her a copy, and she was studying that first quartet. I recruited the dancers. They all agreed... all of them had worked with me before in various ways... Emily Coates with the White Oak Project, Patricia Hoffbauer had learned *Three Seascapes*, and Sally Silvers had learned a couple of my dances. I was intrigued by the idea of working with these four women, all with different skills and histories, and having them learn pretty much the same material.

While at the Getty I kept listening to the music and looking at that tape. I eliminated a few sections. Originally, it was a 23-minute dance, and mine is 17 minutes. Obviously I don't have 12 dancers; that was not the idea. But there are solos and duets, and a trio... And then that first quartet is recapitulated to *The Pink Panther*. That was another very early idea. I just kept seeing those steps to that music in my head.

So, last summer when I came back to New York, we started working. Pat taught them the steps of the first quartet, and then I made these interventions to change it, so that it would not be exactly the same. I wasn't aiming for an exact replication, but rather... I've come to call it various things... In the art world the "remake" is all the rage now, but it wasn't a remake, and it's not a reconstruction. So, now I've settled on "re-vision."

CML: So those are the steps to the ballet, but...?

YR: Primarily in that first and last quartet.

CML: Was it just a vision that you had?

YR: Using the Mancini?

CML: Yeah.

YR: The rhythms of the Mancini seemed the same. I mean, you realize both Stravinsky's and Balanchine's jazz influences when you look at that dance, and sure enough, the steps fit. All we had to do... we had a composer who sped the *Pink Panther* up slightly so that its length would fit, so they do it a little bit faster than they do the steps to the Stravinsky, but it fits. It's amazing.

CML: I thought it was choreographed to *The Pink Panther*, and then you just put the...

YR: Those steps to the Stravinsky?

CML: Yeah, I thought it was...

YR: It's the opposite; it's the reverse.

CML: But that's what's really interesting. It so fit.

When you were putting it together... because there's so much information contained. For example, there are sections where you utilize video. What exactly is happening with...

YR: Yeah, you didn't see that at the rehearsal. There's a solo for Sally Silvers, which replicates a solo by... I think it's Daniel Duell... in the 1982 tape. I didn't want her to learn it, but rather wanted her to do it spontaneously while looking at the monitor. So, what she does... she turns the monitor around so she sees it; the audience doesn't. She will be watching it, and trying to do the steps. So not only is her learning process being presented as performance, but the obvious fact that Sally is untrained in ballet, and as a woman is doing this highly-trained, skilled, male ballet dancer's stuff.

CML: So there's a multiple translation happening.

YR: Yes, yes. lots of layers ... And when I first saw it... she did it once in the studio, I said, "That's it. Don't ever look at this again." She promised not to look at it, although I think she has a tape of it. Of course, in the four nights of performance she'll get more familiar, but still, she'll never completely learn it. Ideally, she would never have seen it at all.

CML: If she could erase her memory each night, that would be ideal... And what is Patricia doing with the video?

YR: Ah, Patricia has a solo to the second section of *Agon*, which is for the whole ensemble—8 women and 4 men—and is very vigorous and fast. So, I show that for about 2 1/2 minutes; I don't show the whole thing. The monitor faces the audience, and she stands beside it doing this very constrained solo where the lower body does one thing and the upper does another. It's slightly improvised. She has a choice of things to do with her hands and arms. Some of them very prosaic and some of them balletic arm positions.

CML: Are they used elsewhere? The video images?

YR: No, that's it. Those two.

CML: And it's not even really used as imagery; more as a tool.

YR: With Sally it's a tool. It is imagery for the other section; we'll have a 25-inch monitor.

CML: So that's interesting that you choose to show a little bit of the actual ballet because then there's a contrast--

YR: Yes, the audience sees the original dance in that section, but the contrast is between 12 people and a solo, and what Patricia does has nothing to do with what they're doing.

CML: But there must be something in your mind--

YR: Partly it's a contrast, a relationship of contrast. And then it's almost like she's in a box next to the box.

CML: I like that. Something I noticed (and this is also just part of what you do yourself), but the sense of precision and time and space and position. That made me think about ballet: the abstract values of ballet in performance, and that even the things that looked elaborately casual were extremely precise. They were specifically-timed casual.

YR: Precise. Oh yes.

CML: Again, that's part of what your work is.

YR: Yeah, *Trio A* is all about that meticulous detail and precision.

CML: And to look very "quotidian".

YR: Well, quotidian choreographed.

CML: Right, exactly, but I also thought it was interesting to see your sensibility of precision informed by the precision of the sense of ballet, not ballet itself... And I thought about that in relationship to Emily because she was in New York City Ballet. Is that right?

YR: Yes.

CML: So, knowing she had been in a ballet company, I was, in a way, projecting on to her, but also thinking about how when you're in a ballet company and you mess up, everybody sees it, thousands of people. And I was getting that feeling of pressured precision while watching the rehearsal, and was wondering how that figured in for you...

YR: Who's messing up?

CML: Nobody's messing up.

YR: Oh.

CML: No, no, no, nobody was messing up, but I was feeling their tension.

YR: Aha.

CML: Their tension and intention, and attention to detail and your attention to detail, and the intensity of that.

YR: Oh, there's that tension, yeah... concentration. It's hard for them; it's very hard, and Sally's concentration... boy, she has to concentrate like crazy to do it.

CML: Well, that for example, we don't get to see, but...

YR: We were talking afterwards—I think you left right after—and there was a New York Times reporter there who was asking questions... It's interesting; I learned some things. Like the fact that Emily dances these steps much differently than she would if she were in a ballet company. She didn't use this expression, but it would be a much harder sell... a much more flamboyant presentation. And here she just does them. I wouldn't call her execution pedestrian, but she is very conscious of my relation to task.

CML: But that was what was interesting, that the relation to task paired with that sense of precision, almost autocratic precision.

YR: I'm quite tyrannical in what I ask for, and yet... One of the hardest things to teach was those moments when they're not doing the steps. There's a part we call "meandering" during one of the solos. They meander to sit down, or to assemble where they'll start the next section, and just to meander is one of the hardest things to do without giving it an attitude, so we worked a lot on that. There's another part where the three women, just before the big partnering section where the three women partner Emily... Emily stands in the center, kind of in a challenging, slightly flirtatious stance, and we worked on that... What do I want? How does she stand there? Her arms are crossed; she's just kind of brazenly waiting. The other three circle around her. How do they circle? They're supposed to look at her, but not too obviously. I kept trying to think of the right image, and nothing seemed to work. It was corny, or sexist, or stagey. And then finally we settled on an image of when you look at someone on the subway, but not directly, by averting your eyes a little bit but still exhibiting interest.

CML: Yeah, I can see it now.

YR: So, yeah. Every moment in that dance, even where it seems very casual, has been attended to very closely. Nothing was left to chance or accident, which sometimes has characterized my work, especially with groups... But yeah, it mirrors that exactitude of the original dance, I think. That sense of meticulous precision.

CML: It's not that you're making the steps so much, but a kind of "meta-ballet." What is the sense of ballet? It's moment-to-moment: absolutely done.

YR: Another thing I should mention. The section that most enthralled me at the beginning was, in the original ballet, a duet between a black man and a white ballerina and today, I think it's still done that way: a black male partnering the white female. And he manipulates her limbs very carefully, especially the legs. Balanchine was working on this in the year in which his then wife Tanaquil LeClerc—*who was a soloist with the New York City Ballet—got polio. He was intimately involved in her physical therapy, which involved these manipulations of her paralyzed legs. So, I took that quite literally and in this section, where the three women partner Emily, she hardly does anything on her own. Her every move is initiated by someone lifting one of her legs or hauling her about...*

CML: It's very striking. I called that section "Engineering the Ballerina" in my head... because they had those truck-backing-up gestures, and all the manipulations...

YR: Ballerina as a machine of some kind that has broken down and has to be carefully handled.

CML: She's not on automatic anymore, so we have to...

YR: Right. So that's complicated, both technically and conceptually because, on the one hand, it's a parody of the wheelbarrow-ing around of the ballerina. On the other, there's something extremely poignant about it at the same time.

CML: Oh, yeah. That was what was interesting and compelling about watching it. It's not just "Engineering the Ballerina." Something else is happening here, and I can't quite put my finger on it. And I think it's that it gives it a certain kind of depth. I think that's in the presence of the people who are doing it, partly. Their understanding of how it's done informs the way they're doing it. Also, all the different presences that are engaged in the activity are really interesting. That, to me, is a difference from a ballet, where there can be a flat presence.

YR: Yeah, in ballet they're so often cut from the same cookie cutter, the women.

CML: There are all of these different layers of attention and intention, and character, which actually makes me think of another question. You said something about interventions, and I really liked that word for what I saw. For example, I know I saw *Trio A* quotes.

YR: Yes, you did. There were some quotes.

CML: What quotes did you use? Were they only your own? How did the movement come about that was...

YR: There are a couple of quotes from my first solo, *Three Satie Spoons* and there is at least one from *Trio A*. The duet for Pat Catterson and Emily begins with a *Trio A* quote, and then in the middle of that first men's quartet, there's a quote from—again for Emily and Pat—from *Three Satie Spoons*: the fingers to the cheeks.

CML: How did you choose where to intervene and at what... or did it just happen as a compositional sense?

YR: I just wanted to make something incongruous in that first quartet. I didn't want them to perform it exactly. There came a point where I got bored with the unison, and I just put in other material. And then the duet... I don't know. I heard it. Musically it worked. So, I just kept playing around. It took me a month to make that duet. I kept doing it over and over. I'm so unmusical. I have to listen and listen and listen. There's another set of movements from *Three Satie Spoons* in that duet... the sequence of hand gestures where one hand covers the breast; that's in there. I don't think there's anything else from my work.

CML: It's mostly then just reshuffling the actual movement from *Agon*?

YR: Right. "Reshuffling" is a good word. There are some very goofy moments in the original ballet. In one of the ensemble sections for the women, all of a sudden, their hands are drooping in front of them, like out of a Bob Fosse musical. It's so silly, they're en pointe and they have droopy, wilting wrists. And so I got that in somewhere. The duet was originally for two women, so it followed quite naturally to start with that, though hardly any movement from the original remains.

CML: I was thinking about the humor in your dance. Was there an intention towards humor, or did it just--happen?

YR: Oh, both. Oh, sure. There's a section called "Soccer Mom" where they all fold in on each other, like they're posing for a sports picture, and Pat is in the back trying to get into the picture. When I first saw that, I burst out laughing. What added to the comic effect was that it was so crafted, or crafty.

CML: Sometimes it seems the craft in and of itself, what you're crafting, you're not trying to be funny; it just so happens that what comes out ends up being very...

YR: They were always asking, "Should we smile here?" and I almost invariably say, "No, don't smile. It's serious work." The humor will come from the positions and relationships of bodies. Don't give it away or overdo it by smiling.

You don't have to let on that you think it's funny. Although, in Pat Catterson's solo, which she taught herself from the original... I told her to smile at the end of it because at that point a smile is like a challenge, "Ok, I dare you stuffed shirts out there to compare me to Wendy Whalen."

CML: Oh, that's interesting. That's another thing I was thinking about: the cast. It's a very particular cast, not least because three of them are older.

YR: Yeah. Well, even Emily you might say is over the hill, balletically speaking

CML: But there's a sense of... it's very specific... who they are in their lives seems very different, and I wondered was that conscious?

YR: Oh, yeah. I wanted those specific women.

CML: I assumed it was, but I just wanted to hear... more about that.

YR: I want to do more work for older women. I think they are underused. I saw the Netherlands Ballet some years ago, and there were these older women, set up behind a table; they didn't even dance, and I'm sure they could dance, they could do something. The choreographer used them as comic relief.

CML: I feel that as people get older they develop such a refinement of presence and performance quality, and most people continue to move quite beautifully, not necessarily with the extremity, but the refinement of performance presence is so much... filling the gap of any movement that I am always very pleased to see good performers who are older. It's a privilege. It's quite rich.

YR: What goes is elevation. You can't get off the floor, but I saw Anna Halprin at age 82 run out of the wings pushing a suitcase, lay herself out flat on the floor and get up on a single beat, still running.

CML: Yeah, elevation, and some extension, goes but who cares? I mean, that's me talking, that's my opinion, but certainly watching your performers, I didn't see any lack. Their legs were going pretty damn high, for example, if that's what you were looking for, that's still there.

YR: The contrast is shown in the final moments in the partnering of Emily where she does a 180 degree split and touches her forehead to her ankle. I find a tremendous irony there, that these three older women are facilitating this extreme flexibility of another body. Like a ballet teacher displaying her young prodigy, only now the effect is compounded because it's three of them.

CML: It's kind of a tense moment actually. It's a little uncomfortable, but I like the discomfort. All those layers are there. That's what I meant about information. How much of this is intentional, almost written information that you're conveying,

and how much is just a result of something you did in another way? Like, what I said about the humor, "Was it intentional, or was it compositional?" I'm getting all of this different information, and having spoken with you, now I think it's a combination. What is it, in terms of your attitude towards making dances and thinking about dance further on. How does this relate?

YR: Well, it just so happens that I was just in London, and a friend of mine had recorded a BBC drama on the making of the *Rite of Spring*, the Nijinsky/Stravinsky work from 1911. It's kind of awful, most of it, but then, at the end, they reconstruct that first night. The Finnish National Ballet has re-created *Rite of Spring*, and so the production cuts between the performance and the audience, which if you know French audiences, you can believe what went on there. From the opening measures of the music, they went crazy, blew whistles, screamed, shouted, and they made such a ruckus that Nijinsky had to stand in the wings counting out the music because the dancers couldn't hear the orchestra. I've been interested in these avant-garde breaks, as in Dada and Futurism and Vienna at the turn of the 19th Century, so I thought, "Yeah, I'd like to do a *Rite of Spring* to the Stravinsky."

CML: It would be another "re-vision?"

YR: Another re-vision, but even more of a departure from any recreation of the original.

CML: It sounds like it's not just dance, it's this sense of history and break. History contained within dance, which is interesting because it's body-history, the history of bodies.

YR: Yeah, there's a way in which my AG Indexical is a pedagogical enterprise. It's informative and analytical.

CML: Right, it's dance analysis, it's like a dance-academic... That's another thing: I thought I was studying to some extent.

YR: And you have never seen the original?

CML: No, I haven't actually.

YR: A friend of Pat Catterson's, who teaches ballet at Tisch, came to a viewing last summer, and he said, "Well, is she going to clean it up?" [laughs] So, people who know the dance and are ballet aficionados are going to see something very different from what you saw.

CML: Yes. I'm woefully deficient in my ballet education, I would say.

YR: So, I'll be interested in how the balletomanes... I mean, will it be like a Graham dancer going to see Richard Move's *Martha*? Will it be like that?

CML: I don't know. It's interesting because it's not the original people who actually performed it. The current performers of *Agon* are re-translating anyway; they're re-visioning all the time anyway. They're just re-visioning it with slightly less radical intervention, but it's different bodies doing it, and different musicians playing the music, and...

YR: Well, I would hope my audiences would appreciate all of that.

CML: I would love to hear what the purists will say, and the people who are really involved in ballet as a form... as a living form. . . So, I think I've covered all my questions, do you have anything you want to add?

YR: No, I think I covered the ballpark.

CML: I didn't even have to ask most of my questions; they were answered anyway.