

## **Embodying Performance Histories in *everything that rises must dance***

Philippa Burt

Hello, I am Philippa Burt and my pronouns are she/her. I am in my early 40s and am a white, able bodied cis-woman with mid-length strawberry blonde/ginger hair and a thick fringe. I am wearing a blue jumpsuit and pinky-purple jacket.

A young woman walks into the middle of the courtyard in front of London's Somerset House. She appears to be looking for a bus before suddenly crouching down to mime texting on her phone. She rises and puts her arm up, as if around the shoulders of an absent friend, and then closes her eyes and stretches out her hands, perhaps in prayer or asking for help. After about a minute, nine more women emerge from the crowd that has assembled around the perimeter of the courtyard and start to perform similar slowed-down minimal movements of everyday life – one washing her face, another putting on earrings, or drinking a cup of tea. Two minutes later, many more women flood the performance space, absorbing the ten who were already there. They walk around and smile at each other before taking their positions in a grid formation and, at the sound of a seemingly distant horn, each begins to perform her own unique movement sequence.

This describes the opening moments of *everything that rises must dance*, a participatory dance piece created by director-choreographer Sasha Milavic Davies and composer Lucy Railton for Complicité. The piece premiered in late September 2018 as part of Dance Umbrella and was presented in three different locations: Greenwich Peninsular (in front of the O2) [Saturday 29 September]; Croydon Boxpark [Sunday 7

October]; and Somerset House [Saturday 13 October]. The piece was restaged in Hong Kong in March 2019 and then re-imagined as an online performance during the Spring 2020 Covid lockdown, each time with new local participants. The aim of the project was to create a ‘living archive of contemporary female movement’ in all its forms that would, in the words of Milavic Davies and Railton, function as ‘a political gesture’ and ‘an anthropological exercise’ in order to ‘celebrate its history and future’.<sup>1</sup> To do this, the pair assembled a group of 200 women, the majority of whom had no previous experience of performing. The group comprised a diverse range of ages, abilities, ethnicities, body types, sexual preferences, classes and professions. Each participant was asked to choose eight gestures that she had seen performed by women in public on a specific date – for the London performances this was 18 September 2018, the day after the first rehearsal – and these gestures were brought together and, over the course of the two-week rehearsal period, developed into that participant’s individual movement sequence. Thus, the performance became an assemblage of 1,600 gestures performed by women on 18 September that were then (re)presented through the bodies of the participants. These gestures were then filmed and have since been presented as part of an online movement archive alongside the women from Hong Kong.

I argue that this performance offers an alternative method of archiving that radically questions and reimagines not only what is deemed to be archivable, but also how it is archived and shared with others. Through its prioritisation of embodiment, female quotidian movement and multiplicity, it challenges any notion of the archive as a static

---

<sup>1</sup> Sasha Milavic Davies and Lucy Railton, *everything that rises must dance* Promotional Material, *Complicité*, <https://www.complicite.org/work/everything-that-rises-must-dance/> [last accessed 30 August 2024].

and hierarchical depository of knowledge. Instead, it offers people multiple avenues through which to connect to the past in a way that is meaningful on both a collective and personal level and which, further, offers the opportunity to imagine potential different futures. I reflect on the dance piece from my positions as someone who engages extensively with archives and who was a participant in the project. My personal experience of it was marked by the fact that 18 September 2018 was also the day that my mother died after a long and painful battle with cancer. The performance thus became, for me, a way of marking and honouring that day: my own movement sequence included, among other things, a hand gesture from a nurse at the hospice and a young girl playing outside the funeral directors. At the same time, performing alongside the other woman allowed me to place the absence of my mother in dialogue with the wide range of female life that was occurring at the same time, as evidenced in the performance.

### **The Project**

The impetus for the project came from Milavic Davies's fascination with the idea of creating 'a census of the movement... of a country or a city....the way somebody drinks a cup of tea, but compared with how a hundred million people drink a cup of tea'.<sup>2</sup> This interest in both shared patterns of movement and the variations between them – whether they be historical, social or cultural – runs throughout the project, where the emphasis is on locating the individual within the collective and giving space to individual interpretations and adjustments.

---

<sup>2</sup> Sasha Milavic Davies, 'Interview with the Choreographer and Composer', *everything that rises must dance Digital Movement Archive*, <https://rescen.net/etrmd/interviews/> [last accessed 30 August 2024]

The structure follows this model: separated into six modules, the dance begins with the participants performing their own sequences individually before they start to perform in unison in groups that gradually grow in size. Initially this is a group of 20, and then builds to a group of 100 before eventually all 200 women are dancing together in a circle dance influenced by Gujarati dance [Gu-juh-raa-tee] [PHOTO]. This introduced another important thread of the development process – the use of female folk dances from around the world that were shared in masterclasses led by local female choreographers. This was echoed in the musical score, which evolved throughout the rehearsal and combined field recordings from the participants with chanting from female rituals sourced from sound libraries. The aim was to connect the everyday gestures of the present with a deeper history of female movement.

Even when dancing in unison, the piece embraced the fact that each individual would embody the movements differently dependent on who they are, their abilities and the experiences and baggage that they are bringing with them. In the circle dance, while everyone performed the same simple step routine, *how* they were performed differed greatly: some walked the steps, while others adding jumps, spins and shouts [VIDEO]. The same was true for the rest of the piece: the movements were in a constant process of adapting and evolving, being recommunicated in response to the live moment and often shifting from performance to performance.

## **Challenging Archives**

The openness of the performance – hence Railton and Milavic Davies’s use of the term *living* archive – is a key way in which it challenged the conventional perception of archives. In particular, it challenges the tendency to focus on the tangible, material object – documents, printed records, recorded audio and video, and so on – at the expense of ephemeral, embodied actions. As Diana Taylor has shown, it is a prioritisation of the official documented history over the performed lived history that leads to a marginalisation of the latter.<sup>3</sup> Drawing on Foucault’s concept of ‘subjugated knowledges’, Joseph Pugliese [Poo-lyee-a-zee] argues:

The official archive is premised on the disciplinary exercises of division and categorical subjugation...Within the archive resides ‘knowledge’: legitimate, hierarchically ordered and conceptually transparent. What cannot be accommodated to this regime is dispatched to the disordered domain of subjugated knowledges.<sup>4</sup>

The categorical subjugation does not, of course, apply solely to the type of material being excluded from an archive, but also to who is present and which stories are told. Taylor, again, shows this process to be part of a colonial and patriarchal strategy that presents the archive as a fixed and unchanging hegemonic entity that serves mainly to verify the dominant narratives.<sup>5</sup> *everything that rises*, by contrast, celebrates the slippages of memory and multiplicity of interpretations involved in any kind of archival work.

It also foregrounds the types of knowledge that are traditionally subjugated by ‘official’ archives. This includes, of course, the experiences of women more broadly, who – as we

---

<sup>3</sup> Diana Taylor, ‘Performance and/as History’, *TDR*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (Spring 2006), pp.67-86

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Pugliese, ‘Embodied Archives’, *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, Special Issue: Archive Madness, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2011), p.5.

<sup>5</sup> Taylor, ‘Performance and/as History’.

know – have historically been absent from a whole range of archives (and, in particular, Black, queer, disabled, working class women), but it also includes the mundane, everyday events that often remain undocumented or overlooked by researchers. I am certainly guilty of this, where my quest to find a particular smoking gun has seen me skim past the fragments of more routine conversations and actions. The inclusion of such knowledges in *everything that rises* is not only a result of the project's stated aim to capture 'the small movements of daily life', but also due to the fact that there is no single person or homogenous class of people responsible for selecting what and who to archive. Instead, it uses a non-hierarchical process of selection that was shaped by each individual and rooted in what stood out to her as important and 'worthy' of remembering.

Finally, the piece expands who has access to archives. I'm sure we've all experienced the frustrations of trying to access archives in the face of seemingly impossible conditions of entry. *everything that rises*, by contrast, was staged as free, open-air performances in densely populated areas such as the middle of a busy shopping area in Croydon. In this way, it dislocates the archive, removing it from a specific building and the restrictions that it may entail, a process that has since been extended to the online archive. This contrast is made most apparent in the case of Somerset House, a site that famously housed many governmental archives between 1837 and 1970, including all the death certificates for England and Wales. Positioned in the liminal space of the courtyard, our performance offered a counterpoint to this history that struck a chord with me: while inside death had been recorded through official written documents,

outside I could commemorate my mother's passing through my (re)performance of the everyday actions that surrounded it.

With its focus on embodiment, multiplicity and play, *everything that rises* becomes an example of an 'anarchive', which goes beyond the archive to include those elements that cannot be captured by documents or text and uses them to stimulate new work and modes of production. Brian Massumi defines the anarchive as a '*repertory of traces* of collaborative research-creation events. The traces are not inert, but are carriers of potential. They are reactivatable'.<sup>6</sup> Hannah Waters explains that this practice of anarchiving is particularly effective in addressing the relative absence of women from official archives since it 'can access women's stories in new ways, through memory, ephemera, speculation, embodiment, multiplicity'.<sup>7</sup>

Further, she defines anarchiving as the act of playing with the chosen material – in our case an embodied movement archive – in a shared time-space and in front of an audience. This practice is seen throughout *everything that rises*, especially in the 'whisper sequence' that formed the central module.<sup>8</sup> For this sequence, a woman was selected to perform her sequence to ten other participants (this was changed for each performance and the person selected was only announced to participants at the start of the section). Each of the ten women then had to perform what she could remember of it to the woman stood behind her, who then had to pass it on to the next woman, and so

---

<sup>6</sup> Brian Massumi, 'Working Principles' in *The Go-To How To Book of Anarchiving*, ed., Andrew Murphie (Montreal: Senselab, 2016), p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> Hannah Waters, 'Sites of Multiplicity: Anarchiving, Feminism, and Performance', *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (2024), p. 196.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198.

on, in a physical version of the whisper game. This showed audiences how this archival material – the chosen sequence of gestures – was being played with and used as a springboard for creation. It also highlights and celebrates the slips, mistakes, misinterpretations and misremembrances that are always involved in archival work.

This embrace of multiple interpretations and projections was extended to the audience, who were invited to read their own stories into the gestures being performed in front of them. As one male audience member noted: ‘I can see my mother in these gestures – it’s like she’s in front of me’. The scale of the piece necessitated this individual interpretation – they are too many women and too many gestures to see everything, so each audience member had to make a choice of how to engage with the piece. Again, the emphasis was on creating a non-hierarchical, collective and individualised experience for the audience that reflected the experience of the participants.

Herein lies the significance of the piece: by making explicit the openness of this archive and giving space to multiple interpretations, Milavic Davies and Railton allowed each participant and audience member to take ownership of it and have their own unique experience alongside others. In doing this, it highlighted the importance of history – and, in particular, performed history – in triggering memories and making us feel something in the present that might help change our perception of the past and approach to the future. In my case, I was given the gift of capturing all the life that was going on around me while I was feeling such loss. For another participant, the presentation en masse of female actions inspired her to push her own body in new ways, including learning to swim at the age of 55. I am, of course, not claiming that Milavic Davies and Railton are



the first and only people to explore the dynamic nature of archives and the multiple interpretations that can come out of it – this is far from true. Yet, their work offers a particular method of working at the intersections of performance and history that, through the centring of the body, can help to awaken the multiple stories and resonances that are always interwoven in every archive.