

After Exhaustion: Technologies of the Self in Legend Lin Dance Theater

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Introducing Legend Lin Dance Theater

As one of the most important choreographers in Taiwan, Lin Lee-Chen founded Legend Lin Dance Theater (LLDT) in dedication to the spirit of revival of Taiwanese culture and identity. From 1995 till the present, LLDT has presented three large-scale epic performances: *Mirrors of Life* (1995), *Anthem to the Fading Flower* (2000), and *Song of Pensive Beholding* (2009). The trilogy was inspired by local religious rituals and rhythms of nature, paying tribute to Heaven, Earth and Humans. The sense of time changes as the performances use breathing, slow walk of the dancers and the changing of images, creating not only a sacred and peaceful atmosphere but also deep feelings connected to the nature and the ground.

Problematization

I would like to discuss the relationship between the self and theatrical training, focusing on Legend Lin Dance Theatre (LLDT) from Taiwan. I was a dancer in the company and went back to interview the dancers for my field study and research. As to the way of my writing, I place my “experience” in a pre-dominant position, and then questions, theories, and explanations are continuously revealed.

The daily training of LLDT sometimes begins thus: Lin Lee-Chen, the choreographer, sets up a 2x2 meter space with judo mats in the center of the studio. Mme Lin asks a female dancer, Rui-yu, to escape out of the region of the mats while Lin also asked two male dancers, Ming-wei and Yeng-ning to prevent Rui-yu from leaving the area. The training—called “the fighting of a trapped animal”¹—is more to do with certain actions or an investigation of spirit rather than a kind of dance training².

This time she held the breath, gazed in one direction with her mind having decided to go but her body standing still there. A deep breath. As soon as she tried to break free, Yeng-ning clutched her tightly and Ming-wei held her down on the legs. She struggled, but in vain; with eyes wide-open she cried out loud from the bottom of her body. Rui-yu slapped Ming-wei’s face, almost hurt his eyes, and was squeezed in return. Three people, three bodies, turned to be a miniature of a Hobbesian Jungle at the moment. Their bodies leaned against one other. Try to go, try not to let go. It’s not merely a lesson of them three. Dancers around them held their breath too hard even to wheeze, hitting the ground by hands or feet as if hitting the drum. What a primitive sound! What a summon! To give all of one’s strength, mind, and spirit. To fight oneself with will and life. Rui-yu twisted to get out and almost succeeded before Yeng-ning held her again. A buffalo battled it out with two panthers. It also resembled a tigress struggled to climb out of a devouring quicksand. Her hair was in a mess. Yet the battle didn’t stop. Her body was finally out of the mats but her legs were fixed as if sticks in the mud. Rui-yu struggled, screamed, ran out of her energy whereas her breath sounded lower but clearly, quickened, breathless, surging up.....

(Luo 2010, p.193)

In order to let the dancers fully understand and attain a special, conscious status from which one derives the basics to reach the extremes in performance, the experience sets up an utmost challenge to the body, mind, and spirit. Regardless of any danger, the dancers actually encourage each other and can only stop until one breaks the limit. It’s interesting to me that Mme. Lin connects the theatrical training to self-discipline when she talks to the dancers thereafter.

It's cruel to challenge oneself, for it doesn't matter when you stop, but when you start. Your strength grows when you don't have any. Lin says, what's inside everyone is the same, so try not to distinguish between good or bad, from this or that. Resonate your inner self and express it, unreservedly. Throw away those that are not yourself by which you can find yourself back.

(Luo 2010, p.193, emphasis added.)

The theatrical training about reality advances to a higher level as is evident in Lin's words: a question of the emergence of the real self³. This is a training about self, about how we imagine ourselves, and how we manipulate ourselves. This issue entangles with the following questions. The first question is with regard to the use of one's energy. How does a performer exert one's energy when it's facing a dilemma? Why does LLDT ask the dancers to give out all his/her strength and power in order to gain energy again? The second question is regarding the relationship between the individual and the group in any sequence of choreography. Why is individuality taken away from each performer and why is unity prioritized and emphasized? How can individuality be expressed through a feeling of complete togetherness where it becomes unimportant to distinguish good from bad? The third set of questions are on the formation of the self. What does Mme Lin mean by "to challenge oneself" or "find yourself back"? What's the real self? Why do we have to throw away ourselves in order to find ourselves again?

Conceptualizing the thoughts

Historian-Sociologist-Philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984) researched on the problem of the subject throughout his life, e.g. *Discipline and Punish* (1975), *The History of Sexuality* (1976), *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* (2001/2005). What is interesting is that his former work focused on how the body was disciplined by the system while the later works focused on ethics and technologies of the self, which were various techniques we practice in order to transform ourselves. If dance trainings were also kinds of technologies of the self, what are the notions of self, the relationships within the group, the society and the environment assumed within the practice?

In his article “Technologies of the Self“, Foucault reviewed his own work, and sketched out a history of how humans develop knowledge about themselves, for example in biology, psychiatry and medicine. Those knowledge systems can be categorized in four groups: technologies of production, technologies of sign systems, technologies of power, and technologies of the self, all of which Foucault regarded as “truth games”:

The main point is not to accept this knowledge at face value but to analyze these so-called sciences as very specific “truth games” related to specific techniques that human beings use to understand themselves.

(Foucault 1997, p.223)

Foucault brought out a dynamic interactive model between humans and knowledge, and conceptualized the understanding of truth. According to him Truth is neither absolute nor sublime; neither constant nor eternal. In the article “Truth and Power”, Foucault mentioned the idea of “truth game”:

“Truth” is to be understood as a system of order procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation, and operation of statements.

“Truth” is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extends it. A “regime” of Truth.

(Foucault, 1984, p.73)

From the first definition, if games were understood as a system of rules within discourse, truth can be explained as a kind of game. The difference might be in scale. If the game as we imagined, expanded in time and space, which include not just the rules themselves but also the production, regulation, and distribution of the rules, or even the relations between one rule system and others, this enormous game might be closer to truth in Foucault’s sense.

The second definition tells us that truth is inseparable from power. Truth takes knowledge as its foundation; power as its operation—a kind of force to expand outward. Power/knowledge has been taken as a compound idea since power will reconstruct knowledge and form a recursive loop in itself. When truth becomes a

habit and is accepted without questioning, or is taken as absolute power, knowledge is given a place of tremendous influence in systems of all kind, including hospitals, schools and prisons, influencing our daily life in the form of micro-power.

However, in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, Foucault has given a different meaning to truth, as if his point of view is no longer standing from afar but zooming in to the level of an individual. Thus he asked the question of how the subject is able to access truth with limited capacity, from within the control of the system. Through the distinction between philosophy and spirituality, Foucault put the notion of truth in another context:

We will call “philosophy” the form of thought that asks what it is that enables the subject to have access to the truth and which attempts to determine the conditions and limits of the subject’s access to the truth. (...) We will call “spirituality” then the set of these researches, practices and exercises, which may be purifications, aesthetic exercises, renunciations, conversions of looking, modifications of existence, etc., which are, not for knowledge but for the subject, for the subject’s very being, the price to be paid for access to the truth.

(Foucault 2001/2005, p.15)

By comparing different technologies of the self between Christian and Greek period, Foucault’s focus changed from power/knowledge to ethic, giving the individual a chance to become a subject. Truth was still the core of this discussion. However, Foucault did not give clear definitions of truth, instead focusing on the ways of accessing truth, emphasizing the importance of practice. Practice was also what makes the difference between philosophy and spirituality: philosophy is the form of thought that determines the condition, while spirituality is the form of practice, the price to be paid for accessing the truth.

From Foucault’s former work to later ones, the contrasts between two aspects of truth become useful for me as aesthetic principles, to analyse daily routines in Lin’s choreographic practice, use of common sense, and also the forming of discourses to understand Lin’s work from a systematic point of view. On the other hand, from a

personal point of view, truth is not to be spoken but is to be accessed through practice.

Why Foucault's theory is important for this research is that it provides multiple perspectives from macro to micro, from passive to active, from outer to inner, which are contradictory in a way but consistent in a larger sense; thus the story of LLDT becomes more complex and more three dimensional.

To sum up, truth can be seen as a form of performing, a way of sensing and feeling, or an extreme spiritual state which the performer wishes to pursue. Those two aspects of truth coexist in LLDT. In the following section I will show how technologies of the self deepen our understanding of Legend Lin's aesthetic.

Technologies of the Self

Looking back at the training of "the fighting of a trapped animal"⁴ in section 1, we see that Mme Lin elevates the theatrical training to infuse techniques of self via her methods or processes, such as "challenging yourself"⁵ or "finding yourself back"⁶. These are not separate concepts but related parts of her process. But how are the parts within the system connected to each other? And what probable meaning do they have when put to test in the choreographic process? In this section I will evaluate the techniques of the self that are used by the company through two aspects—that of the individual and the group.

In dance there are many ways to challenge oneself, such as to be rigorous in body training, to work in harmony with and within the group, and to achieve "control" over one's actions while challenging oneself to push boundaries. For example, there is no body restriction for achieving the actions of "the fighting of a trapped animal," but at the same time, while working on experiencing as well as on creating the experience for the audience, there are some necessities of abiding by the rules with which dancers are motivated to battle—in a bounded area, while one dancer tries to leave and others try to stop him/her. In this process of pushing and controlling one's abilities, the point of the training is not to recreate what one has done, but to arouse what one has never done and experienced and to get rid of all kinds of self-imposed "control", or boundaries—conscious or unconscious.

In one such process, dancer Rui-yu is smart enough to dodge around without

effort for once, but when the duration has been prolonged again and again, and the body feels exhaustion, things that cannot be imagined start happening such as twisting bodies, using unfamiliar muscles, entangling bodies in bizarre ways. Moreover, Rui-yu slaps Ming-wei on the face, almost hurting his eyes. Huei-ru bites into Yi-wen's leg in desperation. Not until the dancers feel the danger for real do they escape from rational condition and react in an instinctive way, a biological way. Therefore the training is always endless. The training is about to start when one feels exhausted. Thus Mme Lin says, "It's cruel to challenge oneself, for it doesn't matter when to stop, but when to start."

In addition, how does the idea of "challenging oneself" connect to "finding oneself back"⁷? What connects the idea of "reduction" to finding oneself back? Jerzy Grotowski (1933-1999), theatre director and researcher, proposes a way for one's real self to emerge through "via negativa", of which the use of long duration and exhaustion are typical methods. In "Statement of principles" (1968/2002), Grotowski states that "emerging from yourself" ensures the dismissal of two conditions: first, the condition on social roles and self in civil life; second, the condition of the brain due to the over-development of science. The self that one has to deduce when challenging it can be taken contextually as the disciplined self of Foucault. That is the social role formed under the utmost use of rational knowledge.

As an example of the development of a social space of interaction, "the fighting of a trapped animal" (from the aspect of the group) and the reaction of the dancers around are worth referring to once again. As already mentioned before, Luo (2010, p.193) describes this experience as "primitivistic" where sound and movements of three movers on a mat in the centre of a surrounding circle of dancers are used by the dancers to create a corporeal conversation—by bringing together their strength, mind and spirit.

As I have also mentioned earlier, the participation of the surrounding dancers is equally important in creating the atmosphere and encouraging the three dancers in the centre. The actions on the mat by the three dancers do not just remain their own actions, but also become an outcome of the way the surrounding dancers participate in the process. The vocal cheering and encouragement of the group always help the

dancer who is devoting him/herself in group activities in LLDT.

“To find oneself back by reducing” sometimes means to sacrifice the individual to complete the whole, through erasure of one’s egotism to contribute to the group. On the contrary, “the trapped animal” helps individuals cultivate one’s potential through the participation within the group. It is important to understand the relationship between an individual dancer and the group to explain the two seemingly different manifestations.

Mme Lin loves to compare the company to a tribe. Besides the fact that everybody thinks through and solves problems together, I think it is more an overlapping responsibility in team work to compensate for the inability of each person that makes her do so. Inevitably, able men bear more tasks following corresponding power to some degree in this tribe metaphor. Similarly, Grotowski regards the relationship between individual and the group as such:

Anyone who comes and works here and then wants to keep his distance (as regards creative consciousness) shows the wrong kind of care for his own individuality. The etymological meaning of "individuality" is "indivisibility" which means complete existence in something: individuality is the very opposite of half-heartedness. We maintain, therefore, that those who come and stay here discover in our method something deeply related to them, prepared by their lives and experiences.

(Grotowski 1968/2002, p. 261)

To Grotowski, individuality is synonymous with indivisibility from the group, which implies that in the creative process anyone has to call out all his passion and devotion to the group and thereby discover something relevant in his life. Creating exercises and labeling actions such as “finding oneself back”, performing as a norm to embrace the group, letting go of oneself and an attitude to go all out even beyond one’s responsibility, are all revealed in the tango of the individual and the group.

This section takes truth as a systematic existence, factually an aesthetical criteria, a method of speaking and doing. Creating exercises of “the trapped animal” for example, to understand how to “challenge oneself” and to “find oneself back” as

forms of being and doing, help actualize ideas that resist body discipline by civil society and resist the relationship between the individual and the group formed by social differentiation.

In the next section I will take truth as a way of performing, a mode of sense and feeling, or an extreme mental status from the first person's stance of a dancer. Under this scope, truth cannot be discussed but only approached. Hence the principal question that structures this analysis is: how do dancers approach truth via their spiritual practices?

Spiritual Practices

The most powerful part—"Passing through the Mirror"⁸—in *Song of Pensive Beholding* illustrates the body in "the trapped animal" best and even reaches an aesthetic level. "Passing through the Mirror" depicts two eagle brothers fighting for the love of the White Bird. The sequence is built around the acts of two dancers, and only when the two dancers endeavor to exhaust themselves thoroughly in the process, can they express the sorrow and pain inside themselves without effort.

In the rehearsal of "Passing through the Mirror", Mme Lin exhorts the dancers, "Exert yourself! Strength will grow again when you run out of it!" People may not understand why dancers have to push themselves to that degree. Ping Yen-ning, who enjoys idleness a lot, has never striven for the leading role, always being chosen for the leading role of Samo in "Passing through the Mirror". He mutters, "Why does it have to be so tiring?" However, he pushes himself to exhaustion every time and gradually realizes what's unique in himself. As he pushes himself towards exhaustion, he feels his strength increase and he is full of energy. The strength seems to be outside the body, not belonging to the body itself and yet it pours into the body endlessly. In his opinion this true experience is really indescribable.

What Yen-ning feels is not about the daily truth or an imaginary truth but a recognition and use of energy very different from its common use. When the dancer

runs out of his stock of energy, his body creates ways of going on by finding new sources of energy, by challenging the boundaries or limits of the body. In that he feels energy pour into his body from the outside abundantly. This experience corresponds to the thesis that energy grows again when the body has exhausted all of it, as Mme Lin says. Her command suggests the logic of the use of the body more than a prompt to the dancers to exert themselves. Energy cannot be controlled by will, according to Yen-ning, but at the same time it belongs to the self, and can only be reached by cultivating strength inside the self. “It is a pity if you give it up,” says Yen-ning. Having found this strength within himself, he pushes and motivates himself to go to the extremity every time.

The energy coming from the outside that Yen-ning discovers, is so concrete and yet so abstract, that it cannot easily be seized. Aesthetically speaking, it is the ephemerality that ensures the emotion of the present to be real, reverberating in the audiences’ mind. Performance is a passage through which one’s spirit is elevated. Grotowski advocates the ethical principle to take risks to the unknown, which means “we cannot repeat an old or familiar route.” (Wolford and Schechner 1997, p. 38-39). Through the passage, performers step into a trance, experiencing a truth beyond everyday incidents. Yen-ning recalls that during the practice of “Passing through the Mirror”, in the early days, he felt that he had an experience of a trance. He describes it as psychic/empty.

Yen-ning: I reminisce a lot when doing “Passing through the Mirror” at the first stage. The choreography was almost done. No! I should not say I reminisce, but I fear a lot. The training was painful. Each time I had to break the limit. I have never done things like that..... so cruelly and strictly. Things come out only when I push myself in such a way every time. I felt horrible during that time—I felt overtired, physically and mentally. But I had to push myself like that. I remember once, after dancing that part, I had an emotional outburst and I could not control it. It’s just like.....being possessed by ghosts.... Ah, No. It’s a kind of emptiness but you can still sense that something is happening or....How unspeakable! I don’t know how to explain!

Tai-yueh: I think it’s important. That you felt not being you. Did it happen because you were forced to do it?

Yen-ning: No! It is under the extreme exhaustion at the end of “Passing,” I felt a state of psychic-emptiness. Do you understand what I mean? In that state, you forget that you are on stage, you forget what you are doing right away, but you still dance and go on as things happen. It’s like that.

(Ping, personal interview, 2011, Dec. 19)

The psychic-emptiness that he experienced by “challenging himself” can be discussed through different aspects. First, his emotions and his body seemingly went out of control, as if possessed by ghosts. Second, he points to a state of being paradoxically empty but full, as he still sensed the part that he was playing. Third, the sense of time and space vanished in the trance, making him forget about being on stage and what he was doing without really stopping his dance. Is it the feeling when people reach truth?

To understand what Yen-ning describes as psychic-emptiness, I would like to refer to Foucault’s theory on the relationship between spiritual practices and truth. Foucault states that truth does not come to the subject directly as a reward for knowledge, but it is manifested by an unpredictable form, “rebounding” to the subject, bringing tranquility of the soul.

I will call “rebound” (“de retour”), effects of the truth on the subject. For spirituality, the truth is not just what is given to the subject, as reward for the act of knowledge as it were, and to fulfill the act of knowledge. The truth enlightens the subject; the truth gives beatitude to the subject; the truth gives the subject tranquility of the soul.

(Foucault 2001/2005, p. 15-16)

Foucault does not consider truth as the reward of knowledge. Truth manifests itself to the subject for the subject to transform and truth rebounds. As to the question of method, Yen-ning says that ways there are many to find the energy coming from outside and reaching the state of psychic-emptiness; but he chooses the most idiotic way. What does it mean to be idiotic in LLDT? Can we examine the relationship between knowledge and practice again from the question?

Yen-ning started to dance in “The Song of Pensive Beholding” at 2009. He

pushed himself every time on stage to go into the known; however, some habits or some easy ways have formed through the repeated experience of performing over the years. He feels his status and his relationship with the performance has changed by the year 2011.

Yen-ning: You know, at the very beginning of the dance (2009), I did not think too much. I followed Lin when she said, “don’t be too smart”, and I did so. Being that kid of “idiotic” nature, where one does not think, I exerted myself without any reserve. I ran out of energy. And then I pushed myself to find it. And then (the thing/power) came out of me again. Every single time being that “idiotic” person made me humble, thus my source of power was more willingly to be found. Now (2011), I notice that, the more you experience, the more sophisticated you may turn to be. But it’s awful to be sophisticated. You know the dance is tiresome. Naturally you will find some way to lessen the burden. But this idea is hideous for it marks the change and things are not like they used to be.

(Ping, personal interview, 2011, 19 Dec)

Yen-ning says that the more you experience, the more sophisticated you may turn to be. To be smart, to save some power without being noticed by the audience, may be easy, but it cannot escape the eyes of Mme Lin and of course, himself. Now, he has to pay some more attention to remove the redundant thoughts to be lazy, and push himself to find his former self, where submitting to the idea of being “idiotic” actually meant to be true to the idea of the willingness to give his utmost. In this context, seeing knowledge and experience as an obstruction to spiritual practices is meaningful.

Foucault distinguishes spiritual practices from philosophy, by which Yen-ning’s experience can be explained. Philosophy enlightens the way to truth but it cannot go to truth itself. While philosophy points out the direction to truth, “spiritual practices” is the way to it. However, knowledge does not help us see through the way to truth in LLDT. It prevents us from making a determined will for spiritual practices. We may define the word “knowledge” here as energy regulation or the knowledge to save energy without it being noticed by the audience—which is often referred to as “being smart” in LLDT. Maybe we can even say that LLDT refutes philosophy to be

knowledge, but instead defines it as an attitude to resist the knowledge constructed by civilization, thus breaking out the necessary link between philosophy and knowledge. If knowledge is reduced to unconscious habits and even obstructing spiritual practices, it is better to go back to the primary state, in which anyone does his utmost idiotically and in more instinctive and straightforward ways, even if it is seen as a space of “no knowledge”. The distinct interpretation of knowledge defines the practical philosophy in LLDT.

Rather than taking a systematic panorama, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* examines truth at the stance of the subject. Foucault mentions three characteristics of spiritual practices about which we understand more after we learn the experiences from the dancers of LLDT. Besides that truth rebounds to the subjects, the other two are about the necessity of the transformation of the self.

Spirituality postulates that the truth is never given to the subject by right. (...) It postulates that for the subject to have right to access the truth he must be changed, transformed, shifted, and become, to some extent and up to a certain point, other than himself.

(Foucault 2001/2005, p. 15-16)

Either “to challenge oneself” or “to find oneself back” is a form of transformation of the self. To see it panoramically, it can be interpreted as a resistance to the roles imposed by society. To see it from the point of view of the dancers, taming of the body means more than knowledge and power, but to experience “truth beyond truth,” one must be willing to change oneself and one’s ethics fundamentally.

It impresses me that when I asked the dancers how they make it in the dance, they replied without a pause, “work, work, work!” Asceticism induces the understanding of the self gradually and brings up unpredictable surprises. Therefore Lin Lee-chen asks, “Do you love dance? How much do you love it?” Lin’s love is more than just passion. It is responsibility, an expression of true enthusiasm and persistence, only when you “do it” wholeheartedly.

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Notes

¹ The same example will be used again in section three of this article, simply with the name: “the fighting of a trapped animal”.

² In this context I did not assume body-mind or body-spirit dualism, rather taking the self as an integrated whole. Thus dance is not just movement, but a kind of physicality as well as an attitude interacting with the environment.

³ The theory of the self is unique and even mysterious in LLDT. In this article I am using a structuralist view of the self in which the self is constructed through interactions with the environment.

⁴ For detailed description of this training please see section one of this article.

⁵ See footnote no. 1.

⁶ In this saying, Mme Lin assumed our habitual self is not the real self. It is only through a process of reduction that the real self can be revealed.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ The final piece of LLDT’s epic trilogy “Song of Pensive Beholding”, including eight sections, “Passing through the Mirror” is about two brothers fighting with each other as well as with their inner self since they both fall in love with the White Bird. This dance is meant to be danced till exhaustion, similar to the training in the “fighting of the trapped animal”.