

3 In-Sync

Entrainment in dance

Elizabeth Waterhouse

This is a chapter about the phenomenon of *entrainment*, a discussion that I would like to motivate by a short case study from the field of contemporary dance. Entrainment names the process through which entities become synchronized and/or rhythmically coordinated. In the scientific literature about animals entraining their movement to a beat, or conversation partners entraining their speech patterns and gestures; the term ‘dance’ is sometimes used as a metaphor to describe this quality of rhythmical relation (Ancona and Waller, 2007; Hall, 1984; Schmidt et al., 2014). Here, approaching the discussion of entrainment from my perspective as dancer and dance scholar, I discuss the potential and challenges that entrainment can bring as a concept for analyzing interaction between dancers. In this chapter I chart a path beginning and ending with the practice of choreographer William Forsythe: from the motivating artistic example of William Forsythe’s choreography *Duo* (1996–2016), through the scientific literature, and then returning with a refrain to entrainment in ballet history and the examples of William Forsythe’s contemporary pieces *Artifact* (1984) and *Eidos:Telos* (1995). Through this I intend to show the value of introducing a more nuanced notion of entrainment, to describe the processes already active in the field. Not just in-sync with the music, entrainment is a confluence of motoric, communicative and social competencies.

Introduction: The case study of William Forsythe’s *Duo* (1996–2016)

People are dancing together – somehow, someday. What do you envision? Perhaps ballet dancers moving in formations upon a stage? Or a Ghanaian gathering involving a rich texture of sound with drummers, singers and dancers? Or a small club, filled with couples weaving and bobbing with similar, but not identical, rhythms? In my case, I am reflecting upon a duet from my own dance lineage—a choreography called *Duo* by William Forsythe (see Box 3.1).

The duet premiered on 20 January 1996 at the Ballett Frankfurt. After a blackout, fluorescent lights turn on to reveal two women at the front of an empty stage, standing before a black velvet curtain. Their black leotards are nearly but not *precisely* identical – a fact that eluded me until the performers pointed it out in

interviews over 20 years later.¹ The dancers wait, focusing straight ahead. Since they face the same oblique angle and are separated by more than half the width of the stage, they cannot see each other's faces. The dance begins with movement synchronization: entrainment. The first motion of unison takes place without an overt visual or musical cue to precipitate it. The dancers do not exchange eye contact, nor is there music at the beginning of the piece. The dancers begin with breathing together, giving subtle amplitude and airy consistency to their motion, and helping them to bind their time. When the dancers hear that the audience is hushed, feel that they have adjusted to the light and intuit that they are both ready, they commence a delicate curved motion – unwinding their right arm and stepping backwards to a pose (*tendu*), inhaling and exhaling.

Since 1996, *Duo* has been performed in Ballett Frankfurt/The Forsythe Company by only a small number of two female or two male dancers (primarily Regina van Berkel, Jill Johnson (see Figure 3.1) and Allison Brown; and since 2013 a version for men performed by Brigel Gjoka and Riley Watts). Regina van Berkel and Riley Watts both confirmed that the beginning of the piece is very difficult for the dancers; the neon lights are harsh and at times one's heart is fluttering in anticipation of performance. One is also very far away from one's partner, a separation at odds with the intimacy of the piece. Riley Watts described that when he first learned to dance *Duo*, he would sometimes imagine himself physically connected to his partner, via an extra arm touching his partner's shoulder, so that they would initiate the first movement with one impulse, synchronously.² Furthermore, dancer Jill Johnson observed that the first movement of unison was not the start of entrainment, but actually part of a larger process:

The entire trajectory of the piece stems from the intimacy and entrainment between the dancers from preparations prior to the piece, to the moment we would walk on stage in the dark, dance the piece together and even beyond the bows and finishing the piece.³

Over the course of *Duo*'s history from 1996 to 2016, the choreography, as well as the music for piano and acoustics composed by Thom Willems, have been revised. Despite these changes, the dancers affirm that the essence of *Duo* has stayed the same. With many differences of degree and kind, *Duo* is a dance involving the interplay of synchrony – what dancer Allison Brown has described as:

[. . .] meeting, arising and coming to each other and being in unison and being out of unison, in aligning and disaligning, but staying together; and this seeing each other with other senses and other body parts than the eyes.⁴

Dancer Riley Watts has described *Duo* as pertaining to the art of elastic temporal integrity. Dancer Brigel Gjoka recounted that *Duo* is something that you live, rather than do.⁵

I have begun this chapter on entrainment, or the process whereby entities become synchronized and/or rhythmically coordinated, with this in-depth account of *Duo*, to suggest the details of the case study that have motivated my investigation of this