

**Working to
Perceive
what
is There**

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In 2006, I began to rehearse with DD Dorvillier as a dancer in her new work, *Notthning is Importantttt*. First performed in February 2007 at The Kitchen in New York City, the performance was a non-narrative trilogy. In the work's first part, "9 Bodies," nine dancers performed a stream of actions in a brightly lit cinema. Then came "Hamma Schwein G'Habt (We Got Lucky)," a movie featuring two familiar but unrelated icons of American folklore. The piece concluded with "Darkpart," a sound installation in a separate portion of the theater, where the performers continued another series of concentrated tasks in darkness. The disjunctive structure of the work offered an alternative to more familiar, linear experiences of dance. What possibilities might emerge for both the audience and the dancers, Dorvillier seemed to ask, if the choreographer resisted the impulse to weave together various elements of performance? What might one perceive if all points of the performance were equally important, and there was no need to force them into a recognizable line?

Just as the work's tripartite structure dislodged the need for coherence in order to make way for unexpected perceptions, so too did *Notthning is Importantttt*'s use of sound, created in collaboration with the composer Zeena Parkins. Of the work's three sections, "Darkpart" featured audio most explicitly. Twenty-five speakers hung nine feet from the floor, creating a hovering world of lush and seemingly sourceless sound. The restricted light, at times darkening to pitch blackness, further focused the audience's attention on what they could hear. In a previous article that DD and I wrote together about the role of sound in *Notthning is Importantttt*, she spoke about her interest in the tensions between perceptual modes. "Limitations cause us to work a little harder (or to work a little less) to perceive what is there."¹ Referring to the particular limitations

in "Darkpart," she noted: "With eyes open one can experience total blackness, so that with the hand in front of the face, one's body is completely invisible. Yet one can hear/feel the dancers as they pass by, and even smell them after they have been moving vigorously for a while. When perceptual aspects are *disreferentiated* (hearing the sound of a dancer running past while seeing total blackness, or hearing the sound as vibration without being able to determine where it's coming from), it's a useful sort of disorientation."²

Among other things, this disorientation was useful in that it allowed the dancers to emerge – both to the audience and to each other – as something beyond characters in a narrative. "One perceives the dancers as bodies, and not so much as personalities," Dorvillier noted.³ Creating conditions so that bodies might be perceived in various ways was not merely a matter of dramaturgy. Questioning one's expectations regarding embodiment is an ethical matter, especially given that these expectations often entail rigid ways of relating to others in everyday life.

"Invisible Ropes": a dancer's training

As dancers, we practiced this kind of questioning throughout the rehearsal process for *Notthning is Importantttt*. In the studio, sound and listening were instrumental in exploring how we might present our bodies to the audience and to each other, and in developing an ensemble that was able to make choreographic decisions without relying on vision.

"9 Bodies" – the first part of *Notthning is Importantttt* – concluded with a brief section that Dorvillier referred to as "Invisible Ropes." After nearly half an hour of scored activity, the dancers lined up against the white projection surface located upstage. The nine performers allowed their

faces to be seen, making eye contact with the audience while trying not to be confrontational. Then, when the timing felt right, one of the dancers would break away from the line to perform a brief solo in which he or she manipulated an invisible rope. (Even though there was no rope, Dorvillier preferred to call it “invisible” rather than “imaginary.”) The dancer could swing the invisible rope overhead, use it to measure distance, throw it, tie it, scrunch it up, or stretch it long. After a minute or so, the eight other dancers stepped away from the wall to join in the mime-like activity. Suddenly, all nine performers were manipulating invisible ropes, creating what Dorvillier called a “response machine.” Occasionally, one dancer would call out, grabbing the attention of the others and signaling that everyone needed to find a new space on the stage. This swirling, absurd activity changed the texture of the space. Then, after a few minutes, the dancers began to toss their invisible ropes at the back wall, as if creating line drawings on its surface. They ran to pick up their fallen ropes, and tossed them yet again. This repetitive activity continued until the dancers exited the stage – quickly and without ceremony. All that remained were extended violin tones from Parkins’s score, sliding in pitch until fading to silence. The lights dimmed, and the movie began.

Although “Invisible Ropes” only lasted for a few minutes, the lengthy training it required was integral to both “9 Bodies” and to the development of “Darkpart.” In order to perform “Invisible Ropes” convincingly, we first needed to recognize the ways in which carrying real ropes affected our movement. We practiced with actual ropes, exploring their material qualities, such as weight, texture, stiffness, and length. We worked on being attentive to the object while also exploring our own physicality. How hard must I grip the rope in order to move it in a certain way?

When I pick up the rope, how do my fingers curl? “You take time to notice something that’s always there, but that we take for granted,” Dorvillier explained. “You could break down a movement of any kind. Any manipulation or touching of an object. You could do it with another body, but that’s loaded, and you’d need to work a long time to get past that. The ethics are about noticing and listening, but also understanding projection. What am I projecting onto the object? I’m trying to get away from projection.”⁴ When practicing with real ropes, Dorvillier frequently urged us to notice the sounds being produced by our actions, for those sounds contained information about the ropes’s weight and texture, as well as the force with which we were handling them. Occasionally, Dorvillier would ask one of the dancers to step aside and try to produce sounds while others in the group continued to practice “Invisible Ropes.” The observing dancer would make sounds to indicate a rope that was swinging through the air, or hitting the ground, or splattering against the back wall before falling to the ground. Stepping in and out of the work in this way helped us to watch and listen to each other more attentively. Interestingly, these exercises were never meant to be performed on stage; they were a kind of research that informed how we related to each other and how we eventually made collective decisions. According to Dorvillier, “We weren’t practicing it for no reason. Something was produced – knowledge, perhaps.”⁵

“DARKPART”: we got lucky

The knowledge gained through rehearsing for “9 Bodies,” as well as the trust that developed between the dancers and our willingness to experiment without relying on vision, prepared us for “Darkpart.” Although Dorvillier fantasized about spending extended periods experimenting in the dark, we didn’t have this luxury.

One problem was that it was impossible to make the rehearsal space match the conditions of the actual theater. Whereas the The Kitchen contained a sound installation with 25 suspended speakers, the rehearsal space (a narrow studio in Brooklyn, NY) had just two speakers, located on one side of the room. More importantly, because the studio had white walls, a wooden floor, and windows, one couldn't make the environment completely dark.

Still, we were prepared because, above all, "Darkpart" involved a tremendous amount of listening, a skill that had already begun to develop through the work of "9 Bodies." When it was really dark, we listened to each other for cues in order to develop the section's rhythm and timings. We learned to gauge where bodies were and what they were doing according to their sounds. We also were very much aware of the noises we made ourselves. According to Dorvillier, "We got lucky in The Kitchen because when you take off your clothes and slide on the floor, it produces a beautiful sound. The dancers made the sound. They were instruments. Without the dancers' sound, this would have been a different piece."⁶ Most likely, it would have been a piece with fewer chances to be gently surprised by the bodies in one's midst and by one's own reactions to them.
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July 2008, Vienna, Austria
Photo: Zeena Parkins

1 "Notes on Nottthing Is Importanttt," co-written with DD Dorvillier, *Etcetera*, No. 8, September 2007. http://corpustoneelkritiek.org/etc/page.py?f=2007-09_jg25_nr108_37-41.xml

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 "DD Dorvillier and Zeena Parkins in conversation with Danielle Goldman, Trajal Harrell, and Alejandra Martorell". *Critical Correspondence*. February, 18, 2007. New York, NY.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.