

Donald Hutera.
Photo: Lilia Pegado/Green



In the firing line

Watch out as **Donald Hutera** tries to take aim at what triggers prejudice

“I hate wheelchair dance.” These possibly inflammatory words were recently sent to me in an email by a choreographing pal of mine. They were written after I’d forwarded a press release to said artist announcing the presentation of work by a physically disabled dance-maker.

I’ve no intention of revealing the identity of either choreographer. It’s irrelevant. What I’m drawn to in this blunt statement is the reminder that we all carry prejudices about with us like so much battered (but usually invisible) luggage. Some are arts-related, while others take on a more personal edge. But when you spot one in yourself or others, it might be worth taking the time to tease out the reasoning behind it.

For instance, what if I were to remark that the Royal Family are a pack of useless parasites? Presuming I did hold this belief, would it have stopped me from having my picture taken beside a waxwork Wills just a few weeks prior to the full blast of wedding mania? I doubt it. Most hacks worth their salt know a good photo opp when they see one.

But maybe the House of Windsor is too easy a target. What if I were to say, ‘Boy, do I hate fat people’? Terribly non-PC, that. Would it help excuse my words were I to add that I try to avoid sitting next to bulky or obese bodies on buses and, especially, airplanes because I dislike having my physical space impinged upon? I’m not sure.

But why stop there? I mean, what about OAPs? A ballet-loving friend once put down the late Merce Cunningham – whom I always loved seeing onstage – as ‘an arthritic old queen.’ Was it Cunningham’s age or his unconventional, even deteriorated, physical condition that triggered that description? I don’t know, but I do wonder what this balletomane would say, or feel, about the work of mature dancers in a community-based context.

Another example: In these very pages I might’ve, in the past, ‘fessed up about my abhorrence of chairs in dance performances. Not wheelchairs, mind you, but chairs with legs. After repeated nullifying experiences watching dancers on chairs, the mere sight of such pieces of furniture onstage used to signal long strings of silent uh-ohs and similar internal alarm bells.

Funny, I can’t recall just what those experiences were. Nor the turning point when my attitude eased up. Anyway, chairs are no longer anathema to me. My current performance bugbear is microphones. Now what triggers the uh-ohs is seeing a mike, whether on its stand or lying on the floor with a black cord snaking away behind it. It means someone – often, but not exclusively, from Continental Europe – onstage

is eventually going to open his or her big trap and speak, and possibly from a prone position.

This isn’t necessarily a bad thing. Some dance-based performers are capable of successfully delivering text. Consider the cast of LOL, Luca Silvestrini’s barbed yet sensitive examination of internet dating devised for his company Protein Dance, or Tanztheater Wuppertal in the works of Pina Bausch. You’ve probably got your own, equally positive examples.

But what about those bloody awful dancers who should just shut up or be shot until they learn how to do it better?

Uh-oh. Did I just say that? My reaction might seem violently over the top. And what if those indulging in the blah-blah I so loathed weren’t really to blame? It could well be that what was being said was crap, which in less vulgar terms means that it lacked truth, beauty, illumination or engagement, and the poor dancers just bore the brunt of my deep dissatisfaction with what the choreographer or director was making them do and say.

All of this, perhaps, indicates ways in which prejudice is born: a negative or discomfiting experience – or experiences, since it can be repetition that wears down tolerance – causes us to lose perspective. Indeed, such events might so (dis)colour our thinking that they yield oversimplified, knee-jerk statements like ‘I hate wheelchair dance.’

I later asked the choreographer to explain this antipathy, eliciting this (slightly edited) reply: “I hate people using disability to access funding when I see many great dancers with able bodies who have worked their arses off for years and can’t get work. I actually like to work with some people in wheelchairs, have done so a lot and am frankly bloody good at it!”

Plenty of worms and, to mix metaphors, chips on shoulders there. This isn’t the place to either dive into or weigh them up. What I found potentially useful was asking, ‘Why do you feel that way?’ and initiating a dialogue. It’s certainly made me rethink what I profess to hate. Maybe I don’t detest microphones, or chairs, onstage as much as I once thought. Certainly I should lighten up about dancers who lack the skills to handle speech. After all, it’s generally safer and wiser not to pack a pistol – or a prejudice – when heading out to the theatre.

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