

# Rewriting Distance: Bridging the Space between Dramaturg and Dancer

by Stefano Muneroni and Guy Cools

Since 2004 the Canadian choreographer Lin Snelling and the Belgian dance dramaturg Guy Cools have embarked on a creative journey together in which they have explored the interaction between a performer/creator and a dramaturg/witness within a performative context. The original research, which has been called Repeating Distance, defined a simple and improvisational score in which these two positions constantly alternate in a series of solos that both build on each other through a process of contamination and keep their own integrity through a process of integration. The score concludes in a duet each time it is performed.

The Repeating Distance practice acknowledges the creative process as a continuous movement between a receptive and an active energy, between perception and action or articulation. As such, it wants to re-appreciate and re-evaluate the energetic and somatic creative presence of the dance dramaturg as witness inside the performance who, merely by his or her silent perception, influences and stimulates the articulations/actions of the performer/creator.

In Repeating Distance the roles of witness/dramaturg and creator/performer stay clearly defined, and this creative distance/dialogue between perception and action, and its repetition/alternation, allows for the ongoing construction of a shared memory bank of movement, images, words, and stories, which future practices can source and draw upon.

Since 2012 the Repeating Distance practice has been further elaborated and deepened in Rewriting Distance, in which the creative dialogue between dramaturg/witness and

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performer/creator was expanded and triangulated with new research topics and the involvement of a diverse group of artists. This new project aimed for further investigation of both the resemblances and differences between the dramaturg/witness and the regular spectator and the integration of writing into the performative practice.

As part of their research, Snelling and Cools organize one-week residencies, during which they invite in a different third partner each time, someone who has a particular interest in and experience of the interrelated fields of performer/dramaturg/writer. These guests are asked to participate in the practice, to make propositions to change it, and to reflect on it in their own writing. The first two residencies took place in the United Kingdom with Miranda Tufnell and Sally Marie. The third residency was held in Edmonton with Stefano Muneroni and the fourth in Ghent-Belgium with Koen Augustijnen. Further residencies are planned with Catherine Lalonde in Montreal, Mary Nunan in Limerick-Ireland, and Christopher House in Toronto.

In the one-week workshop of Rewriting Distance held in February 2012, Stefano Muneroni, a trained and professional dramaturg, was interested in exploring two questions: whether the act of writing about dance changes when the temporal distance between writing and dancing is shortened so that these activities happen almost simultaneously and

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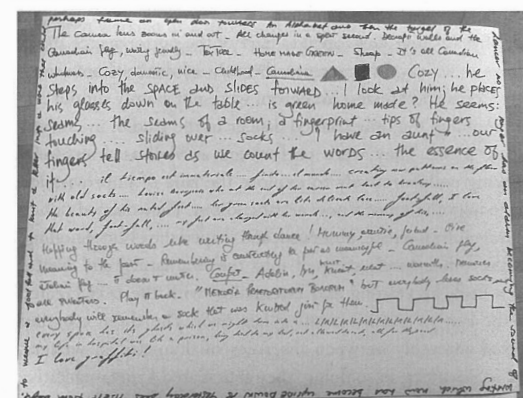
whether writing could meaningfully contribute to the dramaturgical process. The studio space was minimally furnished with a table, where the participants had access to paper and writing supplies; a chair, where they would actively observe the performer and the writer; and a large space, for the performer to move in. Each participant eventually covered every role: the writer/dramaturg, the witness/dramaturg, and the performer. On this occasion at least three distinctive but interrelated forms of writing were explored. The first happened during the performative practice. At any moment, any of the three participants could go to the writing table and add his or her writing as a distinctive voice track to the movement and spoken words of the others. And although the roles and different distances (both physical and mental) between performer/creator, witness/dramaturg, and writer/dramaturg were maintained, part of the research also consisted of allowing for the blurring of the boundaries between them.

Most of the time the writing happened as part of the performer role: the physical embodiment of the writing, the



Lin Snelling engaging some of the text produced at the Rewriting Distance workshop, 2012.  
Photo by Stefan Muneroni

posture at the table, the physical interaction with the pen and the paper. All these activities became an important aspect of the performative exploration. And the writing or the reading (aloud or in silence) of what was written earlier became an important factor in how the different storylines created by the different participants were interwoven. The third voice/track provided additional layers to the notions of contamination and



An example of the text created by the three participants at the Rewriting Distance workshop, 2012.  
Photo by Stefan Muneroni

integrity that defined the exchange, while problematizing the temporal and spatial structure of the event. The second form of writing happened immediately after the performative practice (mostly the next morning) when each of the three participants reflected in writing on what had happened in his or her own words, and the results were exchanged and read aloud. The third form of writing is the further development of the discourse around the practice as in this article or on the website dedicated to the practice: [www.rewritingdistance.com](http://www.rewritingdistance.com).

The practice of Rewriting Distance challenges the role of the dramaturg as the external "eye" that provides distanced perspective to the dancer by placing him or her in the midst of the performance.

If David Abram's claim is true and we have lost our connection to the larger ecological environment—and the use of our own bodies as the memory banks of that connection—due to the overdevelopment of a written culture (187), then the Rewriting Distance practice is an attempt to reverse this process. It configures writing and performing as simultaneous activities but prioritizes the performed text. The commentaries of all participants create concentric circles of distance in time (like in the Jewish Torah) and connect to the original, somatic experience.

The practice of Rewriting Distance challenges the role of the dramaturg as the external "eye" that provides distanced perspective to the dancer by placing him or her in the midst of the performance. It also reconfigures the role of writing about a dance performance as an active, dynamic, and live experience—an activity that not only happens at the same time as the performance but that also affects its trajectory. The nexus created by the interaction of three bodies moving, observing, and writing, and their co-creation of a written and physical text developed as part of the performance itself, allows new ways to conceive the role of dance dramaturgy. Guy Cools and Stefano Muneroni were not simply supporting Lin Snelling, the only trained dancer in the studio, in crafting a new piece. They were performers as well as dramaturgs working collaboratively to explore the role of improvisation in the negotiation of a new artistic idiom. They danced (albeit ungracefully), wrote, observed, and shaped the event. Snelling, on the other hand, stepped into the dramaturg and writer roles both by reading and interacting with the text created by the others and by creating her own. The three together shifted smoothly between the roles of dramaturgs, writers, and performers. In so doing, they articulated a meta-narrative that suggested new possibilities of bridging the distance in space and deferral in time between dancing, writing, and dramaturging, and they explored the organic function of

the dramaturg as writer and co-creator of the performative experience.

Dancing, writing, and observing were treated equally and entered into a meaningful dialogue when the performer came to the table to read some passages or in the transitions from sitting and observing to dancing and writing.

In illustrating the work of several dance dramaturgs, Synne Behrndt explains that "attempts to articulate a 'new' dramaturg are underpinned by an urgency to decentre working hierarchies within the process" (190–91). The idiom and the methodologies deployed in such contexts, however, vary substantially and are often specifically designed around the nature and demands of the single project. In the case of Rewriting Distance, the three collaborators were actively engaging each other, and the creation of their physical and written texts represented their openness to the voice of the others. Dancing, writing, and observing were treated equally and entered into a meaningful dialogue when the performer came to the table to read some passages or in the transitions from sitting and observing to dancing and writing. The writer could not help but be affected by the body moving in the room and the one observing from the chair, and the written text produced during the workshop bears witness to this layering of gazes. The same deeply affective response occurred for the other participants as they transitioned into their different roles.

The collaborative practice of Rewriting Distance reflects closely Christel Stalpaert's notion of a "dramaturgical context," a space where "[t]he outside eye—traditionally attributed to the figure of the dramaturg—bifurcates and shift-shapes among performers, choreographer, dramaturgs, and members of the audience. As a consequence, their function is also blurred" (122). It also welcomes the blurring of previously well-defined disciplinary fields and the confusion of the professional roles of dancers and dramaturgs that resonates in the catchy neologism of "danceturges" (Kirk 84–85). In describing the shifting roles of dance dramaturgs, as well as their ongoing negotiation of what it means to bear witness to the dancers' work, Rewriting Distance constitutes itself as a polysemic space of enunciation, a space that defies polarizations by allowing for a multiplicity of voices, by inviting new approaches to old questions, and by negotiating differences within the liminality of a neutral space. The dance studio became the site of a complex layering of different artistic skills, but the fact that it was new to all three participants helped shape an accepting and non-hierarchical atmosphere where everyone felt included and legitimized within his or her own background. As a practice, Rewriting Distance rejects the



Lin Snelling dancing on/among the various texts shaped during the Rewriting Distance workshop, 2012. With Guy Cools. Photo by Stefan Muneroni

precedence of the author over the process and reinforces what Homi Bhabha defines as "the intersubjective space between agents" (272). In the absence of a true "leader," the physical space of the studio and the creative space established between the participants were welcoming and open to new ideas.

The written text that emerged during the five-day intensive workshop was surprising for its poetic nature, as well as for its allusiveness and reluctance to commit to syntactical order and semantic meaning. Far from the critical language that the participants expected, the text evoked shared memories and sensory experiences of the three participants and conveyed the fluid process that had prompted it. In many ways, it became inextricably tied to the movement piece, acting as both its direct outcome and artistic trigger. On the other hand, the text often defied the ease of the collaborative process by questioning its accuracy and doubting the immediacy of individual perceptions. The following excerpt, written during the workshop, demonstrates the pre-eminence of the question over the answer:

A space of confusion, both visually and acoustically; with a lot of blurred information at the edges; a lot of layers on top of each other; different colours; different sounds; wind playing with fabric; the reflection of the sun on cars passing by. The inside reflects the outside. Four circles of increasing complexity. The smallest, inner circle: just a horizontal line; the horizon? the border, the edge. The second circle: a human figure and the letter A—the beginning of mankind? The third circle: a cross under a bridge or a mountain—our destiny? The fourth circle: three almost parallel lines, a crowd next to a house on legs—three always know more than one and this room has legs, is fluid like all the rivers we visited. A line of circles. A circle of lines. Breaking the symmetry of the framing. (Cools)

Snelling, Cools, and Muneroni shared Christel Stalpaert's invitation to dramaturgs to try different strategies in their work: "Why cling to the status of the dramaturg as the expert, as the vessel of knowledge? As a dramaturg, dare to stutter, dare to stammer, create a poetic language in stammering" (123). The three collaborators experienced a similar sense of liberation from structures and hierarchies during the workshop of Rewriting Distance as they investigated new ways to communicate and a new form where physical, verbal, and literal texts found a fertile terrain to shift and exchange meanings. Not only does the practice of Rewriting Distance blur the boundaries between dramaturg and dancer, but it also turns the dancer into a critical researcher and makes the dramaturg a co-creator of the piece.

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Stefano Muneroni is assistant professor of intercultural theatre in the Department of Drama at the University of Alberta. He is a theatre historian, dramaturg, and translator who taught in Italy, England, the United States, and Canada. He has published academic articles on Latin American theatre, religion and drama, and translation.

Guy Cools is associate professor of dance studies at the Fontys School of Fine and Performing Arts in Tilburg, Netherlands. He has been working as a dance critic and curator in Flanders and as dramaturg for Les Ballets C de la B, Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, Akram Khan, Daniele Desnoyers, and Christopher House.