

Between Structure and Indeterminacy

Anna Halprin and
the Score for *The
Five Legged Stool*

Through the use of text and graphic symbols, scores can direct performers, but also tease out structures in performances that are difficult to perceive. Harmony Wolfe on the unperceivable in Anna Halprin's task-based dance performance *The Five Legged Stool* (1962).

Amongst the practices of the interdisciplinary avant-garde of the post-war American period, event scores in particular can be construed as a common practice; musicians, choreographers, poets, visual artists and architects, at some point used them. Composer La Monte Young and poet Jackson Mac Low's 120-page tome, *An Anthology of Chance Operations*, demonstrates the many manifestations of scores: from poet Yoko Ono's 'instructions' to choreographer Simone Forti's 'dance constructions,' scores could be text and graphic symbols directing performers.¹ The malleable form of scores, as a notational and generative device for movement and actions, offered a prism for working between multiple disciplines, pushing conventional boundaries. Scores also elided geographic boundaries, often circulating between artists on the East and West Coast as the means for conversing and sharing ideas. Choreographer Remy Charlip, who danced for Merce Cunningham, mailed his scores in order to have dancers across the country realize his choreography.² Newly forming choreographic strategies, such as those of Anna Halprin, were especially aided by the adoption of scores. I would like to examine more closely a score designed by landscape architect Lawrence Halprin, Halprin's partner, and drawn by Curtis Schreier for Halprin's 1962 performance *The Five Legged Stool* (fig. 1). While the score was drawn after the performance, the score's implied precision and structure reveal the unseen choreography in the performance, and offers

insights into Halprin's practice of task-based movement.

Halprin played a vital role in the development of American modern dance.³ Her 1960 summer workshop holds particular historical and aesthetic resonance as it introduced participants such as Trisha Brown and Yvonne Rainer to her pedestrian, task-based movement. Integrating principles advanced by Halprin in their choreographies, Brown and Rainer subsequently inaugurated postmodern dance in the formation of the avant-garde Judson Dance Theatre.⁴

The workshop also effectively segued Halprin's shifting choreographic practices involving task movement and improvisation. Task movement includes activities such as brushing your teeth or jumping rope. They are not part of a codified technique, thus disrupting the conventions of dance technique by focusing on individual interpretation rather than learning specific steps. Tasks, for Halprin, are within the genre of improvisation. In a 1987 interview with improviser Nancy Stark Smith, she explains her investigations in improvisation as initially focusing on kinesthetic impulses and transiting into the kind of movements possible through tasks:

At the beginning it was mostly pure spontaneous movement using space, time and force for the playing of elements. Then I went into tasks like carrying logs and passing them to people, fall and stand for twenty minutes, lean on 25 things, etc.⁵

1 Poet Y. Ono's 'To George, Poem No. 18, October 29, 1961' obscures its directions under black ink, making them an interpretative imagining of the performer. S. Forti's 'Dance Constructions' directs a group of people to move while staying huddled together and another 'Dance Construction' proposes three people move constantly over and around an 8 x 8 inch piece of wood slanted at a 45 degree angle (p. 97). These examples show two widely different aesthetics of scores. In: J. Mac Low, L. Young (eds.), *An Anthology of Chance Operations*, New York 1963, pp. 35, 97.

2 R. Charlip, *First Remy Charlip Reader: Five Articles from Contact Quarterly*, New York 1986.

3 New York-based choreographer Richard Bull also extensively used improvisation, especially in performance. Other choreographers who used improvisation in some

of the same aspects as Halprin include Ishmael Houston-Jones and Steve Paxton.

4 S. Banes, *Democracy's Body: Judson Dance Theater, 1962-1964*, Ann Arbor 1983, p. xvii.

5 N. Stark Smith, A. Halprin, 'Returning to Improvisation', *Contact Quarterly* 12 (1983) 4, p. 25.

6 A-B-A is a compositional form where the first section of choreography is designated A, the second is designated B. The repetition gives a specific beginning, middle and end, and a sense of structural closure.

7 A. Halprin, *Moving Towards Life: Five Decades of Transformational Dance*, Connecticut 1995, p. 258.

8 H. Biegel, *Anna Halprin: Dance Scoring as an Alternative to Choreography*, Riverside 1988, pp. 43-44.

In contrast to the supposedly 'pure' improvisation, task movement does provide certain boundaries.

The limitations that Halprin imposed, such as qualifying falling and standing by establishing the limit of twenty minutes, enabled her to find or invent new material. It avoided the possible circuitous route of a 'spontaneous' improvisation by forcing her to process the material through very specific, objective criteria. Task movement enabled Halprin's goals of finding movement supposedly unique to her rather than based on emotional expression or habit. Improvisation, for Halprin, constituted the means for generating material but not for the sequence of movements with relationship to music or lighting.

This type of improvisation is linked to her choreographic goals at the time. Divorcing narrative and emotion from gesture, style, duration, tone and phrasing, transforms the way meaning is produced through movement by relying upon the audience to build meaning through personal associations. Conventional compositional forms such as A-B-A, narrative or recurring themes are no longer present.⁶ An arm circling overhead loses narrative significance and becomes the physical fact of a rotating, extending limb.

The Five Legged Stool premiered on April 29, 1962 at the San Francisco Playhouse.⁷ Besides Halprin, fellow members of Halprin's San Francisco Dancers' Workshop performed. Experimental composers Morton Subotnick and David Tudor provided musical accompaniment. The dance demonstrated Halprin's burgeoning interest in a 'total theatre,' to challenge the audiences and performers' expectation of what is 'natural.' Besides juxtaposing visual art, music and movement, emerging in her choreographic practice was the use of scores to map choreography and introduce props into her work. The use of scores also enabled interdisciplinary collaboration. As researcher Heidi Biegel explains, 'During the creative process of *The Five Legged Stool* the performers drew many sketches of the spatial configurations of the activities, the sequences of events and interactions between artists.'⁸ According to Biegel, these more idiosyncratic scores were used in rehearsal and

subsequent performances, and discarded afterwards. Although in *The Five Legged Stool* Halprin experimented with improvisation and composition, it appears Halprin and the performers did not fully engage in the risk implied in chance and indeterminacy by working out patterns for movement in the rehearsal period. Lawrence and Schreier's score rigorously lays out space and time, seemingly offering little opportunity for chance, or choice on behalf of the performer, adopting the conventions of cartography, musical notation and mathematics in order to organize the performers' movements.

Like a map, the score has a title and key. The title, Halprin's full name, date of production and cast of dancers are at the top of the score. The legend has been placed on the left hand side. Triangles, squares and circles describe tempo, stage directions, and language. The body of the score resembles a graph consisting of a y-axis (location) and an x-axis (time). The y-axis is divided into five sections with considerable space between them. Each section belongs to one of the performers, and is made up of five stacked horizontal lines. Each line represents a location in the theatre: dressing room, backstage, the pit, stage and proscenium. Resembling a musical score, the x-axis is divided into segments of five, the dance is listed in subsequent records as an hour and a half long. The five-minute time markers run from top to bottom through all five sections, connecting the performers in time. The performers' tasks are written into the graph, and although they share a time notation, the performers' actions are isolated due to the individual y-axes, implying there is no causal relationship between the movements.

The score's organizational tools of cartography, mathematics and musical notation illustrate how Halprin contested choreographic conventions, such as psychological expression, narrative and recurring themes. The score's x- and y-axes, rather than a narrative arc of beginning, climax, and end, structure the movement. The use of task movement divorces movement from emotions. Dividing performers' activities from each other, yet overlapping them, fractures the cohesion of a

single choreographic vision, resulting in the appearance of performers acting on their own intentions.

Although the movements, their duration and location all seem predetermined, suggesting the performance must have resembled the score's rigour, the performances were characterized as wild and chaotic. Critic Robert Krauskopf, for instance, experienced the performance as followed:

The action, which has by intention no concrete meaning, nevertheless reminded me of a typical American family—completely dominated by mother—getting up in the morning. There was Ann, the harried mother, wandering about the stage and the audience doing all sorts of chores like picking up father's liquor bottles until she fell in exhaustion. In the bathroom for 30 minutes putting on a gorgeous black wig, was big sister, Lynne Palmer. Little brother, A.A. Leath, spent his time trying to upset everyone by rolling a bicycle wheel across the stage. And poor father, John Graham, was so hen-pecked that when he wasn't carrying mother on his back, he was swinging from the ceiling.⁹

Krauskopf's spectatorship portrays the performance as frantic, visceral and textured. The choreography occurs onstage as well as in the audience, and is characterized by a myriad of busy activities, asking the audience to participate in the meaning of the dance by choosing what elements to focus on. Despite the narrative Krauskopf has projected onto the performance, his description provides access to correspondence between the performance and the score. The score contains movement sequences, such as Man 2 moving bottles at time markers 60 through 70. It also instructs the performers to break the fourth wall of the concert-dance stage by extending the range of their movement into the space of the audience. At time markers 40 through 45, the performers collectively bow *in* the audience,

closing for Act I. The pedestrian movement, running and jumping, and range of location for dance, demonstrates how Halprin initially shifted boundaries of what constituted dance and its place in society. If a dance could be comprised of everyday movement and found in a theatre lobby, then the limits of dancing become permeable.

Krauskopf's description also teases out the paradoxical relationship between the precision of the score and the chaotic nature of the performance. His description of Halprin, as 'the harried mother', suggests a rushed, chaotic texture to the choreography. How would the quality of chaos be produced under the condition of the score's rigour? Looking again at the score, which cues inform the resulting spectatorship?

Despite the rigid temporal and spatial markers, there are several possible indicators. The overlapping movement of the five individuals, the use of props, and the spatial range of the movement, suggest ways the dance might resemble a busy family lifestyle. As indicated in the score, several events happen at once. At time marker 75, Halprin, Leath and Graham yell while Palmer runs through the audience. The performers clutter the stage with props such as bicycles, bottles and boxes, creating a visually busy landscape. When Man 2 walks through the audience to get to the stage, the dance breaks through the fourth wall imposed by the proscenium arch. Towards the end of the piece, performers travel through the audience, ending in the lobby. Layering bodies, props and sounds creates juxtapositions, indicating spontaneity rather than carefully choreographed movements.

In making use of juxtaposition and task-based movement, Halprin blurred the roles of the performers, musicians and set designers. She explains, 'In (the) Five Legged Stool what happened was that all these independent elements were developed: the use of sound, vocal material, the word and its content, the painter and the way in which the painter became, very often, the choreographer.'¹⁰ Dancers

9 R. Krauskopf, 'The Five Legged Stool', *Impulse* 5 (1962), p. 38.

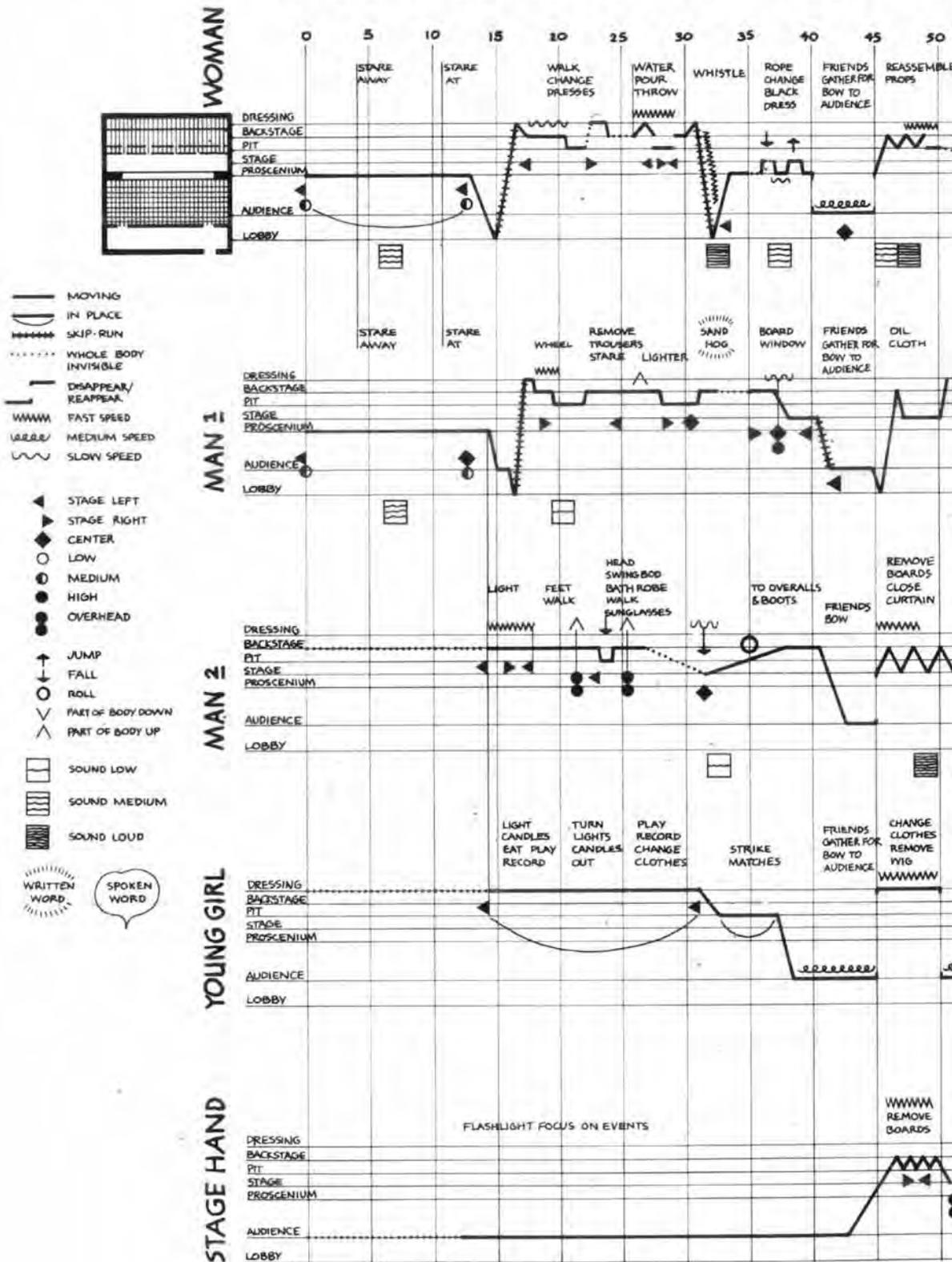
10 Y. Rainer, A. Halprin, 'Yvonne Rainer interviews Anna Halprin', *The Tulane Drama Review* 10 (1965) 2, p. 147.

WOMAN- ANN HALPRIN
MAN 1- A. A. LEATH

MAN 2- JOHN GRAHAM
YOUNG GIRL- LYNN PALMER

STAGE HAND- JERRY WALTERS
LIGHTS- PATRIC HICKEY

THE FIVE LEGS



ED STOOL ANN HALPRIN MAY 1962

55 60 65 70 75 80 85 90 95

CHANGE TO RED
YELLOW
SCARVES

HUM GRIN DONT GRIN PLEASE STOP IT I AM REMOVE SCARVES

TAKE IT GRIN DONT PLEASE STOP IT HA HA

TRANSISTORS
SUGAR IN
COFFEE
IMPROVISE
WORDS

TAKE BOTTLES HAND ARM HUM BOOTS

CLAP
SING
"MIGHTY FORTRESS"

FEATHERS

became concerned with the imagery of their movement, set designers choreographed movement for theatrical elements, and musicians focused their attention on where sound occurred in space. In a 1965 interview, Halprin provides an anecdote of this experiment:

For example, in Act II, I wanted to keep bringing objects out and putting them down and going back, taking objects out and putting them down. The painter we were working with, Jo Landor, kept watching this going on and one day she came in with forty wine bottles and said, "Here, I want you to bring these in." She almost set the kind of movement I did. It's pretty hard for me to know who choreographed that work, Jo Landor or me.¹¹

The blurring of artistic specificity is further represented in the score. The stagehand is qualified in the same pool as the other roles fulfilled. The score does not dictate the quality of the movement, nor does it specifically quantify the speed. Should the movement be performed with a certain emotional resonance? Some of the movement descriptions, located on the left hand side, vaguely characterize movement, as quick or slow. Movements are rendered as visual elements, rather than as actions performed in a specific spatial and temporal organization.

What the score emphasizes, perhaps, more than anything, is how Halprin conceptualizes choreography. Rather than choreographing movement in the form of steps, Halprin assembles characters, sets, tasks and props. The actions no longer supply the audience with meaning through recurring themes or the closure of narrative. Dance did not need to represent myths or allegory; it could reflect common, everyday concerns and aesthetics. The indeterminacy that is foregrounded in the performance, which leaves meaning to be produced by the audience, is revealed by the score to be intentional, carefully organized. Therefore, the score proves a valuable tool in

order to map precisely that which remains imperceptible in Halprin's work. ●

Personalia

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¹¹ Ibidem.