

RiDE: the Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance – Special themed issue
(Precariousness and the performances of welfare)

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ABSTRACT:

This essay consists of three 15-minute audio files and a written essay. Audio files #1 and #2 are performance scores made by dance artists Antonio de la Fe and Robert Vesty for *A Piece For Two (Lovers)*, a performance of which was realised on February 20, 2015 at Royal Holloway, University of London. #3 is a conversation between de la Fe and Vesty recorded unrehearsed for this special issue of RiDE. Together, the essay draws attention to the way in which the performance piece theatricalised its inherent precariousness. De la Fe and Vesty have been in a romantic relationship since December 2012 and the piece draws on themes of volatility and strength. The essay then goes on to propose de la Fe's notion of *unrehearsed* not just as a mode of making that can be seen as an 'artrepreneurial', (to use Jen Harvie's term), disruption of conventional modes of making artistic work, but as way to simultaneously reclaim and denounce precarity by re-thinking *unrehearsal* as a vital choreographic process.

KEYWORDS: choreography, precarity, unrehearsal

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On *A Piece for Two (Lovers)* – an unrehearsed performance piece

Robert Vesty

We all know about the impending catastrophe - ecological, social - but we somehow cannot take it seriously (Slavoj Žižek)¹

On August 14, 2014 I received an email from my lover – dance artist Antonio de la Fe. It started with this:

...A piece for two lovers
 a piece for two, lovers
 a piece, for two lovers
 a... piece for two lovers
 a piece for, two lovers
 a piece for two lovers...
 A piece for two lovers,
 a piece for two lovers.
 Two lovers for a piece.
 For two lovers, a piece
 a piece, two lovers for
 A piece for two lovers.
 For two a piece, lovers
 A lovers for two piece.
 A piece for two lovers,
 a piece for two lovers,
 a piece for two lovers.
 A piece, for two lovers

Figure 1.

And went on with a proposal:

How could I/we possibly make a piece for two lovers, being one of them myself and the other one my beloved partner; a piece which is real rather than a performative mannerism, therefore never performed before; a piece that doesn't need to be rehearsed and that in fact takes both lovers by surprise without being an improvised piece; a piece that is the same choreography yet different each time; a piece that shows the full trust a lover has in the other and in the intentions behind the other's action... and that of course isn't longer than 15 min?
I do propose to make this piece together without compromising each others decisions. To do so, one will make an audio-score for the other without knowing what the other is planning for the one.

Figure 2.

This proposal was realised in a performance on February 20, 2015 when de la Fe and myself walked on to the stage of the Boilerhouse theatre, Royal Holloway University London and exchanged mp3 players containing a performance score we had each made, in secret, for the other. Listening through personal headphones, we pressed 'play' at the same time and performed the scores at the same time – a 15-minute piece. The audience could not hear the scores we were listening to. They could, however, witness two male performers dancing and not dancing, talking and singing, dressing up and undressing, as they carried out each other's instructions for the very first time.

The two 15-minute scores are included here (#1 and #2) amongst the three audio files that form part of this essay. The third file (#3), is a recording of a 15-minute conversation between de la Fe and myself, and took place almost a year later. It was recorded in one unrehearsed take and reflects on the performance piece within the frame of this special issue's concern with precarity. Probably the best time to listen to these three files is now, before reading on. The performance scores could also be listened to simultaneously in order to affect an experience a little closer to both the duration and spirit of the piece.

A Piece for Two (Lovers) usefully speaks to discussions about precarity in at least three ways that I would like to draw attention to here. Firstly, insofar as its making was bound in a set of ubiquitous social and economic conditions that trouble the way in which precarity discourses proliferate. Secondly, in respect of the piece's theatricality, which was used to reveal, expose and even shout about both its volatility and strength. Lastly, in the way that its making might disrupt the manner in which rehearsal is valued and understood as a phenomenon. In fact, this piece sits within a broader body of work being developed by de la Fe that deliberately and explicitly asks not to be rehearsed at all – his *Unrehearsed Series*.² I comment on each of these concerns in turn, but with particular attention to this theme of *unrehearsed*.

A Piece For Two (Lovers) was staged within a UK academic conference programme – *Dancing Economies* - one characterized by discourse around precarious work and labour conditions. As part of the conference's ecology, the structure and content of the piece were likely to have been received in the context of these discussions, imbued with the language of affect, economy and value. As an example of such language, Jen Harvie has recently proffered 'artpreneur' as a term to describe artists learning to survive conditions (political, economic and social) that are 'increasingly casting art practice as economic practice' (Harvie 2013, 62). Artists are subject to conditions, exacerbated under neoliberalism, which often demand that they make their work predominately as a labour of love. As an artist-scholar with a fractional post in a UK University theatre department, my position, one could say, is privileged. I have a relatively stable monthly income, which affords my artist-self some secure footing. The conditions for de la Fe are more precarious. He directly supplements his artistic work with income from non-artistic work which, although also freelance and somewhat precarious, at least provides him with some sort of

regular stipend. Theatre commentator Lyn Gardner has drawn attention to the way in which many artists working in the UK are engaged in a form of ‘self-exploitation’ in order to get work made, and she blames a funding climate that leaves artists ‘surviving on thin air’ (Gardner 2016). Regardless of the source of our funding streams, and even though we have both been recipients of small amounts of public funding through Arts Council England over the past year, we are each more or less engaged in a kind of auto-philanthropy.

The content of this first iteration of *A Piece For Two (Lovers)* addressed some of these concerns directly as we each adapted our scores for performance at the *Dancing Economies* conference. Discussions of precarity and the arts in academic contexts can sometimes seem at a remove from the real social and economic conditions that some artists are working in, and in turn risks being seen to ameliorate those conditions. This begs the question: how concerned with precarity are precarity discourses? At 02:45 in *Antonio's Score for Robert*, I am told to repeat the following statement out loud: ‘maybe you should have a conference entitled *The Economies of Academia for Dancers and Coherency between a Plethora of Events and Discussions about Dance and their Unaffordability for Dance Artists Outside Academia*’. This statement expresses de la Fe’s suspicions of the proliferation of precarity discourses in the relatively privileged domain of the academy, with its internal economy of conference and research activity that out-prices and excludes artists working beyond it.

The title given to the session of works we were performing in by the conference organisers, *Friendship and Love*, points to another way in which *A Piece for Two (Lovers)* speaks to concerns about precarity. Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter have asserted that ‘[I]n its most ambitious formulation (precarity) would encompass

not only the condition of precarious workers but a more general existential state' (Neilson and Rossiter 2008, 52). Elsewhere, Judith Butler (2004) has outlined how conditions that produce precarity might act upon the private sphere of the body. *A Piece for Two (Lovers)* offered a 'show' of our partnership, bound in experiences of trust and relative stability but with little attempt to hide its volatility too. The normally private domain of romantic partnership was exposed here as what I am minded to call a 'volatile strength'. This was a piece which relied on each lover trusting the other, in ways made visible through the on-stage theatricality of the double-act, while crediting each other's individuated nature in relation to material which played with messiness and dysfunction.



Figure 3.

This touches on the way *A Piece For Two (Lovers)* speaks to precarity in terms of its theatricality. Clearly there are some overtly precarious conditions built into the work's theatrical structure not least because it demanded that we encounter

the score, for the first time, at the same time as the audience. This led to a particular aesthetic of precarity being produced. For example, reflecting on the performance, my experience of those fifteen minutes might be characterised as one of trying to keep up with it - a feeling that I might have been falling out of step with its demands. De la Fe remembers feeling ‘totally unprepared for the task’ but ‘as if his whole life was meant for those fifteen minutes to take place’ (de la Fe, email correspondence). At times our performances remained in calm juxtaposition, at other times they interfered with each other chaotically – either one of us being asked to perform a task *on* the other while at the same time attempting to keep to the tasks instructed through the individual scores.

A Piece for Two (Lovers) also invited us to commit to a set of performance conditions that challenged our individual autonomy. To an extent, autonomy was devolved – each lover to the other as we each did as we were told. As an example of this, at 0:51, in *Antonio's Score for Robert*, de la Fe, in commanding tones, says ‘do what I am asking you to do at the same time I’m telling you to do it, without further consideration’. While, at 6:07, in *Robert's Score for Antonio*, I instructed de la Fe to sing along to the lyrics of CocoRosie’s *Jesus Loves Me*, knowing that it would present a challenge for him to do ‘well’ in ways that possibly led to an aesthetics of lack; a lack of order, security, and virtuosity.

To bring these theatrical and contextual concerns together, it may be worth reflecting on Žižek’s observation, cited above, and draw attention to the fact that for all our working with volatility, risk, and lack, we could not quite take any impending failure, or catastrophe, seriously. There is a way in which *play* through performance can become a radical act of resistance by producing abundance rather than lack. It works in tandem and tension with the everyday social and economic constraints under which artistic work is sometimes made. However, just as precarity discourse might be

seen to ameliorate its effects, so too might *play* risk upstaging catastrophe and weaken any call to action.

What might this then say about how artists respond to a lack of resources more generally?

One effect of scarce resources is the likelihood that artistic work remains under-developed or under-rehearsed. De la Fe's *Unrehearsed Series* can be seen to circumvent this by being actively and purposefully unrehearsed – a playful response to the catastrophe of lack perhaps. But can *unrehearsed* be so easily dismissed as a mode of working necessitated by a lack of resources? What if this way of thinking about *unrehearsed* is also reductive and instrumentalised, and risks ameliorating precarity's effects? And what if this in turn runs the risk of further entrenching or validating those policy decisions that produce precarity? Artists' survival instincts – their 'artrepreneurialism' - must not be used as a salve to precarity's sores.

Which is why it is imperative to draw attention to the fact that, for de la Fe, *unrehearsed* has emerged as a strategy worthy of being discussed outside of precarity's terms. Of course *unrehearsed* has been necessitated by poor funding structures and resources, and it responds directly and unapologetically to that constraint, but, for de la Fe, *unrehearsed* is not just a way to re-think rehearsal, it is also a way to re-think choreographic processes.

Conventionally, in theatre and performance, *rehearsal* is seen as a process where we 'repeatedly go back over and practice material' (Allain and Harvie 2014, 241) to get ready for performance, and it is generally accepted that 'rehearsals cannot replicate the experience of performance, only prepare for it' (ibid., 242). As such, a lack of rehearsal would appear to lead to an un-readiness for performance. Yet, for de la Fe, *unrehearsed* becomes an explicit part of the choreographic score in an attempt

to re-claim lack as a dynamic mode of working, such that it is already ready. While time is spent in advance to create a performance score, where the detail is thought-through, planned, and developed, often in collaboration with a producer, mentors and others, de la Fe does this to, in his words, liberate himself from ‘the need to use my body, or other bodies, to make, winnow and fix (and sometimes even modulate, modify and mutate) material’. In this way *unrehearsed* emerges as having value in and of itself. It invites an access to ‘life-long experience and expertise at the same time that we surrender from the over-thinking about it, letting it be transparent and just work for us, by trusting that it’s what we need at the time of performing a piece’ (de la Fe, email correspondence). De la Fe places value in *unrehearsed* performance drawing on everyday life experience as already ‘honed’, ‘repeated’ and ‘harrowed’ over time through prior experience and expertise. His practice of *unrehearsed* frees him from the obligation to engage in repetition in order to hone material *ready* for performance. Instead, de la Fe’s *unrehearsed*, hones within the context of performance itself.

Where might that leave *unrehearsed* as a strategy worthy of further discussion? What might de la Fe’s *unrehearsed* offer the field of choreographic practices, for example, or even rehearsal studies? My hope is that de la Fe’s conception of *unrehearsed* ways of working might be questioned as to its value, revealing its inherent tensions and paradoxes. For while *unrehearsed* responds directly to, and certainly does not aim to disavow, the precarious conditions that act upon artistic work, it also re-appropriates that lack in an active, playful and dynamic manner. De la Fe’s *unrehearsed* simultaneously reclaims and denounces precarity - a valuable way of working (perhaps), without weakening any call to arms when it

comes to the struggle for artists for fair recompense and appropriate resources for their artistic labour.

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BIOGRAPHIES:

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Robert is an artist-scholar based in London. He is a lecturer in Theatre Arts at Middlesex University, a doctoral candidate (Royal Holloway, University of London), and a performer who draws on a training in acting, and a practice in dance. His performance uses improvisation as a tool to make instant compositions and his research is looking at improvised speech in dance or movement-based performance practices.

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Antonio is a Spanish performer and choreographer based in London. He was among the BBC Performing Arts Fund's '32 Ones to Watch' in 2015, working with Independent Dance. He was selected to join the Sadler's Wells Summer University programme (2015-2018) led by Jonathan Burrows. He has made a series of works for dance and other spaces in the UK and across Europe.

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¹ Žižek is attributed this quote in the context of an article on novels that deal with the subject of climate change, published in *The New Yorker* (see Kormann 2013).

² See <http://www.antoniodelafe.com/> [Accessed September 16, 2016]