

## **Pas de trois: or the dancer, and the dancer from the dance.**

**Writer: Adrian Rifkin  
Dancer/choreographer:  
Fearghus Ó Conchúir**

**I just read Andrew Holleran's new novel, *Grief*. I don't at all know what to make of it, though I do know that Holleran makes a speciality of the unresolved so my response feels adequate. When I say this it is not to suggest that he has a literary trick, one that he repeats in different stories;; it's more that the unresolved is his medium and it enables writing; that there is no space in his writing between a syntactic half-breath and how the narrative seems to unfold. This was true in the unusual complexity of *Dancer and the Dance*, and in another way it holds for *Grief*. Other because in the older novel we never really know who is speaking, who is the 'I' or the 'we': the miracle of the book is our never fully realising when or where or how the story happens in its breathless series of ellipses. This is why I always wanted to write on it, from my first reading of its opening pages, to hold my ecstasy in check. But in the new novel the 'I' of the narration is monolithic, a middle-aged gay academic speaks out of the process of mourning his dead mother – a process that will remain unresolved and of which the scope, lost between the mother and the gay history of an epoch and its affective possibilities, is never clear. In either book, between the reader and the text, it's hard to establish a third term, an object, as if one were terribly engrossed in reading – nothing? So there is a conceit in the title of the piece, this dance between Fearghus,**

**Holleran and me, this meditation in three voices that hear and don't hear, see and don't see one another. There is no threesome, one is already a crowd.**



(Fearghus, as seen by me before we met)  
When Fearghus and I first talked about this we knew nothing of what we wanted – or if we wanted anything at all; you could say it was an anonymous meeting in the way a relation with a text can be anonymous, an idle effect of cruising on the internet in 2005, intersecting lines no more. 'Hiding in the light' as Dick Hebdige memorably put it.



(me, as seen by Fearghus before we met)  
At the intersection, after the few preliminaries that are required by the online rendezvous with its amorphous sexual charge, I said to him that I am trying to write an essay about a topic called *Choreographesis*; but that I know nothing of choreography, nothing technical, nothing about how it is done, nothing more than I culled from the odd culture programme on TV; and that I am sure it is nothing to do with choreographesis. This, I

blushingly explained, appears to be the neologism for a theoretical comportment: for a mode of addressing oneself theoretically to theory from within its confines, and that this might be do with a possible choreography of theory itself. I blushed to say that this; that it sounds so sounds dry. And it's my kind of work, not his, and one of my steps is the one that keeps the feet dry: moreover I think that, really,



(Fearghus, two choreographies after we met)  
It is pretty dry. It's bravura, but in an odd contrast to the Renaissance idea of sprezzatura – of effort shown as effortless -, it makes the work of thinking look like more of an effort than it is, rather than less; or at least formalises its effortfulness as a sublimation and an affect inscribed on the body of theory's canon, like a tattoo. This is the purple prose of theory, and I can understand why the Tango can be taken as a more sensuous analogy for this effort of balance and manoeuvre and why it is so tempting for us to write on it, to write it on ourselves, as did Sally Potter in her film *The Tango Lesson* (1997). I said some of this to him, but not all, - though I did blush -, and Fearghus said that I should come watch him practice, invent movements and rehearse, that I could come to see *him* thinking. I agreed, because perhaps this relation would draw near to the immanent neologism, in the bringing together of the masked effort of observation, of watching, with the naked labour of rehearsal.



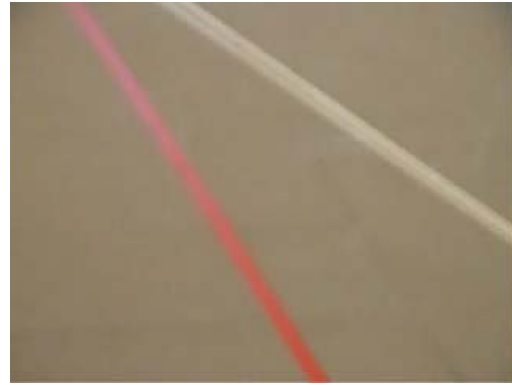
And it was hard, for me, in unexpected ways, just as it is work for him. So I closed my eyes, even while the videocam ran for me. Two things first, two sounds, breathing and footsteps: when we see sport or opera or dance on television or from quite far away in a theatre, these sounds make but for a small part of the spectacle. I know one opera recording on Video, a *Tristan und Isolde*, where, because of the lighting, the poor black and white quality of the tape and the style of the production, the visual focus becomes the singers' diaphragms, shifting, heaving, controlling and supporting the tremendous column of sound that they sustain over five hours or more. Under the metallic *faux*-armoured garments this physical and optical vibration deranges narrative and score alike, and if I had to find a neologism for this it would be *phono-* or *pneumographesis*. The opera, in all its musical complexities, proceeded as if devolved from this imagery. In effect, however, all this does for the neologism is to throw doubt on the on the part-word *graphesis* as a kind of false universal. For if each social or biological process acquires in turn its trace-ishness, its quality of being left over from whatever it never was, and then it just looks too slick as a solution to the anxiety of making a new problem or object for ourselves. In Holleran's novel the after effect of disco is cold sweat, t-shirts that can be wrung out, salty muscles, leftover residua of desiring states, but neither copies nor quite traces of them. In *Dancer* the t-

shirts come before the disco, piled on shelves in the vanished Malone's dressing room, crammed into drawers, bright coloured, washed out, used and softened, banal and sexually promising or as if a promise; and in his walk-up tried on one after the other by the novel's 'I' as he sets out for the disco, every time he sets out, fine discriminations and bets concerning desiring prospects.



*(he takes it on and off at my request... he sees if he can make a step with it, I want him to put on all the t-shirts found in Malone's deserted house, so he disappears within them, -graphesis? ... but after more than one practice session together I begin to notice short, almost imperceptible relations of movement some of which remind me of lines in the novel, that he as been reading. In some cases I get it right to the very paragraph, in others I am just dreaming that the neologism might, after all work or be put to work. He likes a passage from Dancer where men sit on a couch in the disco watching the others dance and the succession of watchers and dancers; a dance of vision and exhaustion, is one moment where the desiring structures of the book fold around each other, and for this underscores how my step was ever the sidestep...)*

And likewise in the studio what I heard was not a graphic trace, not even that.



In the room I heard bare feet scraping against floorboards or hard rubber, and the risky sound of scuffing, bruise, of splinter, and the visual trace itself was raw. Breath, unevenly and violently in its articulation to movement as the complexities of movement made their demands on it as if it was an exhaustible supply: not at all like the palpitating, armoured midribs of the opera. I noticed all this because, when I had begun to watch him rehearsing, practising, inventing I did not know what to look at and so I had closed my eyes and listened. And I tried to think of Andrew Holleran, because what I wanted to write on was *Dancer and the Dance*. At the same time, at this point, the sound was a poesis of kinds, at least for me in my listening; that is to say it sounded like a coming into being, though when I did open my eyes it looked like something else, something lighter if more difficult: a continuation: technique, method, concentration, invention a poetic in its making. A strange almost lying position, part broken yoga with folded knees, spring like energy in a direction that defies intuition and seems only set to break, an improper utterance, nonsense in my language, and then he stands and falls again. I am pleased that this seems to repeat from time to time across the floor... I like it and want and wait for it. From this too I know two things: that *-graphesis* is never in itself enough, and that the trace is not necessarily tragic, or even

sad. At the worst it leads on to the next.



(...keeping track might be like reading the novel: Fearghus, on Gaydar: *It's interesting that you see the movements in terms of problematic and solution (knot knees - free hand). For me they are only*



*problem or resolution differentially. They're just movements that precede and follow one another - one might just as easily be the resolution as another. I think. It's the resistance to the organic solution that makes it so, perhaps.)*

I have always wanted to write on *Dancer*, since I read it all that time ago, and I was using the postfix – *graphesis* to give myself an alibi; to insert myself in an honourable tradition of cultural and queer studies; a useless gesture, for I wanted only to recall how for a brief moment after I bought it the novel had come to choreograph my daily life. I was in New York, perhaps a couple of years after it was published and during the next two to three days of an over busy social round I would even leave a dinner table between courses to grab a few pages in my host's bathroom, undertake any shifty

manoeuvre to read even just a few lines more. Of course I was in love with the hero Malone; he was for me, many others, a fragment of a generation perhaps, the paramount figure for what it was to be in love, for falling in love with love, or at least its physical rewards in all their diversity. If to desire without ever really finding was the great *askesis* of a circuit of gay life – albeit a limited and utterly metropolitan life quite cut off from a wider world of homosexuality, as we see time and time again in *Dancer* -, then the exercise of desire had to figure itself in all those practices that deferred the finding – the disco, the baths, the leather bars and backrooms, dark amniotic, suspended between the frenetic courses of bodily exhaustion and an infinitely patient waiting. Waiting to open the eyes and see only what has passed, This is a poetic, waiting, closing and opening the eyes. Later I will rediscover it in the poetry of Saint John of the Cross and his spiritual exercises, but then I had forgotten in him in my own life and in Holleran's utterly profane belief. But also what could be desired and loved in the novel was and remains a state of mind that came into its own a few years later with AIDS and its irreparable losses of life, and affect and desire alike. As if we were born for it.



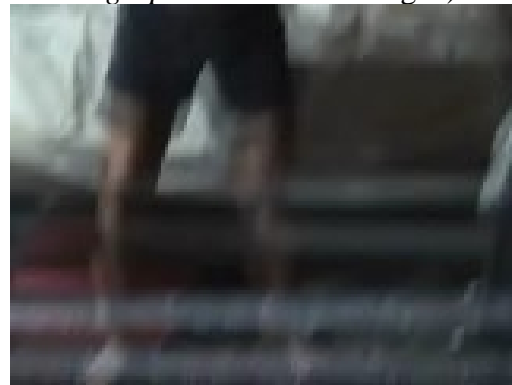
Now when at least in the richer, well-medicated metropolitan north survival has replaced doom, *Dancer* can be read as a monument to something that it preceded, as well as reminding us that



loss anyway precedes the self. But also like Rosamund Lehmann's in *The Weather in the Streets*, for example, Holleran's writing has a breath, a little catch in the grammar or the rhythm of sentence, a paragraph, a page, nothing more, a fainting, an *évanouissement*, which is an ideal rhythm of the subject as it flickers in our times – even if the rate of flicker, the dance of the subject is so much more rapid with him. This bare movement, infinitesimal slippage on the edge of what can be noticed, sustains the choreography of the Disco which is the book's core image for the worship of desire. It nourishes vigour with its opposite. (how long we hold our breath in this kind of dance, all of this I half-said years ago in a short piece written for the Sydney Mardi Gras: a Gay monument as nothing more than the holding of a breath and an enduring refusal of anything more than transience.)

(Yet now, listening to one of the master tracks of Holleran's disco, Zulema's *Giving up*, I can't work it out at all. I am still hearing it as I watch him rehearse and it gets squarely in the way. The rhetoric is simple enough, a tinny rhythm electric piano, and electric string surge of melody and some repeated, thumping chords then the singer's voice, *Giving up is hard to do if you really (chorus) luuuve someone*'... Simple enough in the way that dance music often has a certain guileless complexity that comes from doing two things at once, to be listened to and to move to, as well as accompanying the watching of this duplicity, of this attention-inattention and mimesis that makes possible the idea of *dancer from the dance* after Yeats and no longer deriving from him. Even reading Richard Dyer's equally classic 'In Defence of Disco' it won't fall into place, and listening to Zulema it's not easy to imagine the ecstatic dancing of Holleran's account; cold, here, in this study, no drugs, no

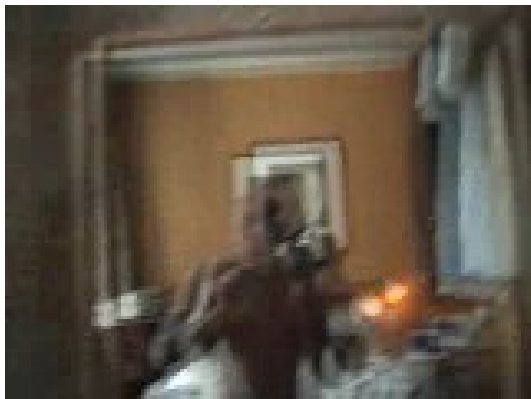
late-night exhausted energies recuperating themselves from the desire to carry on, fecunding themselves in the violent fetish of the fetish itself, repetition deferred: I like it, in the end, but it won't do enough, it can't show enough and, probably, techno and the leathery discophobia of the 80s-90s cusp years have made it hard to find. ....giving up, giving up is not quite hard enough to do, if you don't love quite enough. Or if you have forgotten how either to love enough or love too much, whatever enough might be or have been, in its time; or if you really fear love as the point of giving up the dance that anyway will never find it, and then find love and fail to mourn the dance in turn. How can all these paces fall into a *-graphesis*? Is this enough?)



(Several listenings later I use Zulema as a warm up for my daily stretching session. ((Why did I stop dancing so many years ago? of course I was concerned with a concern with an image, a mistaken image in communist politics of the time, of the oppressed and of the time of political redemption as a time in which there was no time to dance, at least until after the epiphany.



(((But when I do this now, another guilt or discontent cuts through that old displacement, the condensation of a feeling that even when I ran five miles a day I probably never breathed as much as does Fearghus in 10 minutes of rehearsal (((perhaps this is why I try not to look, or just look through a viewfinder)))) on the discomfort of the floor.))) An epiphany that would only be achieved in the breathing time of the whole end of capitalist social relations, so we all held our breath as we did not dance, and the gay men in Holleran sucked and breathed as they danced, and we all ended up nearer the end of history than before, those of us who are still alive and breathing, and now I begin to understand if not Zulema then at least Richard Dyer's essay)). So I videoed myself warming up, my limping movements against his, and I can't graph one onto the other, other than as a miss. There, above is one image from my tape and here another.



(From Fearghus on Gaydar: I'm gone again. just popped on because I was curious to read your response....



4.  From: 5 December 2004 13:15:47 "Is it enough?", you ask. It's difficult to know what's enough, what's excessive, until the moment of trial. One surprises oneself with weakness and resilience. Curiously I suspect that I don't enjoy pain - that if I judge my experience painful it is not pleasurable. However I have no fear of intense sensation and so the limits of what is sensation before it becomes pain are extensive enough to permit interesting investigation.) But, in Holleran, the independence of this subtle prosody from the already strange voices of the novel, and its odder conjunctions with them, makes for a suspended and sure sublimeness that can, for me, never be more than a few stolen tears without a sorrow I can name.



With my eyes closed, I imagine I can hear this in the gaps between breath and scraping, the sound of the body coming down to the floor ... and rising

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up in turn.



(this swinging back and part up in a movement that makes no sense if the body is not to break, what is the sleight of what body part than enables it to erect? )

But for what I was hearing, that undid it, or rather it allowed –*graphesis* a single honour -, to enter into the naming of this process. For the moment choreographesis can be this – an addressing of myself to the next moment and its possible moves. Choreographesis will thus unfold as a relation of internal and external possibilities of movement and their constraints in the organisation of the three voices both in their individual agencies and their restricting interactions. Thus the dance will be extracted from the dancing body of the gay men in the novel into the formalising processes of social-affective interactions figured in the relation of the three voices. It seems important that, though the moves may be generally predictable, or foreseeable after they have happened, they will not have had a prior logic that may be identified with the apparent logic of their outcome. If this is a polite way of saying that there will be no argument and, as a result, no resolution, this both in the hope of realising the material here, on the pages, and of escaping the controlling concept of a *graphesis*. Then we can begin.



Credits:

**Cosán Dearg.** Conceived and choreographed by Fearghus O'Conchuir in collaboration with Jason Byrne and Julie Feeney. Performed by Bernadette Iglich and Fearghus O'Conchuir. **Match**, conceived and choreographed by Fearghus O'Conchuir. Directed by Dearbhla Walsh. Performed by Matthew Morris and Fearghus O'Conchuir, who asserts his rights over all the above images other than the two of 'me dancing'.