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## Abstract:

This article discusses the pedagogic practice of British choreographer Rosemary Butcher (1947–2016) with a particular focus on the ways she mentored dancers and choreographers as part of her self-curated workshop series Critical Pathways, programmed over a number of years at Independent Dance in London. Drawing on archive materials, personal research notes as well as practitioner interviews, the article draws out some of the idiosyncratic pathways of dance training that practitioners encountered as part of the series, and the ways these continue to influence their ongoing practice. The writing thematises Butcher's signature use of language and conceptual tools for choreography-making, as well as her approach to teaching and mentoring dance practitioners, which was inextricably tied to her choreographic practice. Never seeming to settle on a formula that had worked before, there was an arguably timeless and endlessly adaptable inexhaustibility and curiosity to her approach to making that are key qualities of inventive practice. The article further discusses the ways that Butcher instigated processes of critical self-reflection and approaches to reinvention as part of a continual investigation into what dance and choreography might be.

## Keywords:

Rosemary Butcher, choreographic practice, dance-making, mentoring

## **‘Critical Pathways’ – Training and Investigating the Art of Choreography-Making with Rosemary Butcher**

In contemporary choreographic practice that entails experimentation as its core and aims at the development of a unique artistic signature, there is plainly not a specific method to be transmitted and learned in the context of dance training. British choreographer Rosemary Butcher (1947-2016), who herself held a unique place in the international dance scene, regularly taught and mentored practitioners in the independent dance sector. In her pedagogic practice Butcher did not seek to transmit a specific method – instead she seemed keen to support the development of unique signature practices, which anecdotally resonated with many contemporary dance practitioners who cite her teaching as highly influential to their development. Whilst Butcher was a prolific dance teacher and pedagogue with frequent teaching assignments across many institutions<sup>1</sup>, she also regularly taught and mentored many professional dance practitioners in the wider independent dance scene in the UK and across Europe, within which she navigated her own choreographic practice. Professional dance organisations that recurrently invited her to run workshops include Tanzquartier Vienna, Joint Adventures in Munich and Danshallerne Copenhagen in Europe, with Independent Dance and The Place being representative for the UK – to name only a few. It is in these contexts outside of education institutional parameters and requirements that Butcher arguably was able to engage with aspects of the art of choreography-making closest to her own professional interests and ongoing

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<sup>1</sup> These include long-term affiliations with the University of Surrey, Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance and Middlesex University in London.

choreographic investigations – operations which I propose to conceive as being driven by a meta-praxiological approach through continually questioning what dance and choreography might be as part of the process of choreography-making itself.

In this article I present an outline of Butcher's teaching with a focus on the ways she taught choreography-making as part of her self-curated workshop series Critical Pathways, programmed over a number of years at Independent Dance in London. I highlight several approaches and operative principles of Butcher's teaching practice, with a particular focus on how she dealt with the processual in the context of teaching the 'making' of dance works. I further discuss her highly idiosyncratic use of language as part of her teaching and mentoring practice, which has been foregrounded as influential by many dance practitioners that worked with her, with Butcher herself repeatedly emphasising her interest in 'language as a source' for the choreographic.

Writing over the course of 2020, with Covid-19 restrictions and their consequences only just starting to play themselves out in multiple harsh ways in the dance sector and with the independent dance scene under particular threat, a wider urgent call for a reinvention of the field is also strongly forming in direct response to the Black Lives Matter movement. With these acute social and political developments unfolding four years after Butcher's death in mind, I frame the present investigation into the space that Butcher facilitated for dance practitioners to further their choreographic practice with the idea and potential for reinvention in mind. I intend that this outline of Butcher's teaching practice – who as a white, female British contemporary choreographer held her own stance over four decades at what might be called the periphery of the independent dance scene – will offer navigational tools and pathways for self-reflection, reconception and reinvention, at a moment in which I believe approaches

to renewal are most needed and called for. At the heart of this endeavour is a strong trust in choreographic practices and their inherent experimental ways of working as potential sites in which affirmative ways for shaping a constructive future may be discovered and initiated.

### **Notes on Methodology**

I approached the present writing as an experiment – much along Butcher’s ways of thinking and working as a choreographer – by stimulating a process to collectively remember Butcher’s teaching and mentoring practice together with several dance practitioners who encountered her in this role. In methodological terms, aspects of this article relate to the area of ‘life writing’<sup>2</sup>, which describes “a range of writings about lives or parts of lives, or which provide materials out of which lives or parts of lives are composed” (Leader, 2015: 1). Yet while implicated, it is arguably not the ‘life’ of Butcher that is in sharp focus here, but the ways in which her past lived choreographic and pedagogic practice continues to impact and influence the professional practice of selected dance artists.

In order to address such areas, I actively draw on practitioner anecdotes of moments remembered from dance artists that trained or worked with her, which seem in the judgement of the individual practitioner to have marked moments of realisation, insight or transformation, triggered by their encounter with Butcher, in relation to their

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<sup>2</sup> The term ‘life-writing’ is attributed to Virginia Woolf who in 1939 highlighted issues of conventional biography-writing and foregrounded “invisible presences” such as a person’s memories or awareness of others as key to the biographic (see Lee in Leader (ed.) 2015: 124).

creative practice. Moreover, parts of the conversations undertaken revolved around Butcher's ways of working, the particular anecdotes related to which can be conceived as aiming to establish a 'likeness' of Butcher as choreographer, teacher and mentor.

As it has been evidenced, memory tends to be reconstructed rather than recollected, and the relationship between the event itself and its reconstruction is in tension and question (Lee in Leader (ed.) 2015: 127-128). The use of the anecdotal here is implicated with the ways that the selected practitioners judge their encounter with Butcher to have ongoing relevance in their professional lives. In this regard the anecdotes presented point to moments of "the past encountering the future" (Lee in Leader (ed.) 2015: 129) in the sense of pinpointing specific moments that are judged by the practitioner to have had transformative impact on their choreographic practice, which – to some degree or other – continues to unfold.

In concrete terms, this writing is directly informed by conversations with several dance practitioners. Amongst these are Kirsty Alexander and Lauren Potter who are both professional dance practitioners and educators that worked closely with Butcher over several decades. Further conversations took place with dancers and choreographers who have taken part in various iterations of Critical Pathways: Harriet Latham, Yuka Negoro, Carolyn Roy and Susan Sentler. I also accessed notes written by Marion David who undertook a placement during the 2014 iteration of Critical Pathways. I am grateful for the generosity of these practitioners who invested time and energy to support my research into Butcher's legacy not only as a choreographer, but also as teacher and mentor.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, the materials presented in this article were strongly informed by my

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<sup>3</sup> Ethical consent has been received from each practitioner.

close research collaboration with Butcher over the past decade of her life. This relationship led me to accompany her in various teaching and creative contexts and endeavours, and while I mostly held the role of an observer in these spaces, I engaged in my observation from an insider perspective to Butcher's ongoing research and investigation into choreographic practice<sup>4</sup>.

The many handwritten notes that seemingly remain with dance practitioners and researchers who worked with Butcher, as well as the countless notebooks that Butcher filled herself as part of her creative practice that now constitute parts of her archive, in and of themselves point to the complex preoccupations with language and the conceptual that Butcher continues to be known for in dance practitioner circles. In this article I identify and discuss specific material and discursive patterns of Butcher's pedagogic practice in an attempt to capture aspects of her unique vision and conceptual tools for navigating creative processes. It is my hope that the differing modes of writing and visual materials presented here – including notes written by Butcher, dance practitioners and myself – offer a sense of encounter with past lived choreographic processes and practices and their remains in view of their current and future relevance.

The varied sources and resources selected are worked into a process-focused account of Butcher's choreographic and pedagogic practice, also thematising how these modes intersect. The aim is to render and reflect the experimental force and inspirational quality of Butcher as choreographer and mentor to many dance practitioners who worked with her, through presenting a necessarily partial but

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<sup>4</sup> In a few instances my own background as a performer led me to participate in her classes, the experience of which has considerably informed my understanding of Butcher's teaching and choreography-making. The many conversations we had over years framed not only by our working relationship as colleagues but also by a close friendship has provided me with insights into many intangible aspects of her practice.

arguably exemplary selection of materials and tools that were central to Butcher's practice, while foregrounding some of their inventive qualities.

### **Critical Pathways as enquiring into choreography-making**

As briefly mentioned, while Butcher regularly taught in many professional dance schools, university dance programmes and especially early on in her career in schools, institutional requirements often were at odds with her pedagogic practice, in the sense of not being fully conducive to how she preferred to work as teacher and mentor. Devising her own workshops and professional training courses outside of institutional expectations and conditions enabled her to pursue her interest in mentoring dance practitioners with a focus on the "creative route of process" ('Critical Pathways', Independent Dance Website, 2016). Her earliest self-curated classes took place from the late 1970s onwards at Riverside Studios<sup>5</sup> in London, which many contemporary dancers and choreographers attended and continue to cite as influential to their development and careers.

There is conflicting information as to when Butcher conceived the first Critical Pathways workshop, which was run as part of the programme at Independent Dance situated at Siobhan Davies Dance Studios in London, UK. The last iteration took place in early 2016, only months before Butcher died, which was at least its eighth run but might have been its tenth<sup>6</sup>.

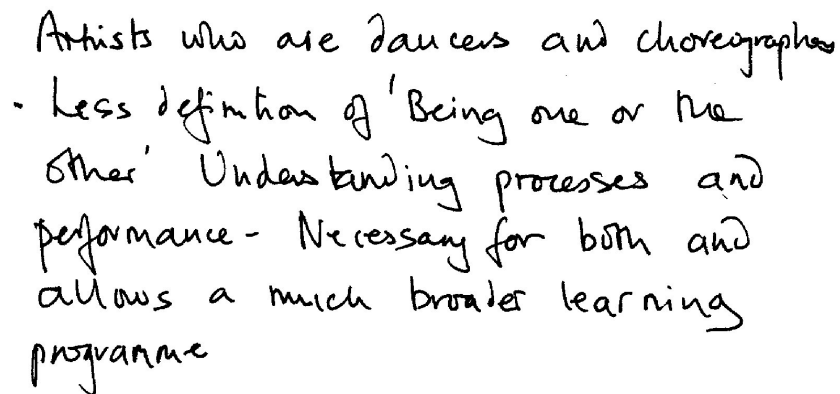
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<sup>5</sup> Riverside Studios was run by artistic director David Gothard at the time who offered support for Butcher to develop her choreographic work.

<sup>6</sup> In 2013, Butcher stated in an introductory talk as part of Critical Pathways that it was in its fifth year. However, an archived document held at Independent Dance states that the first iteration took place in 2007.



Whatever the exact timespan, the series constituted a sustained yearly pedagogic and research project devised by Butcher that was aimed at experienced dance artists who identify as dancers and choreographers – a trend that emerged historically with dancer and choreographer figures such as Isadora Duncan and Martha Graham and extends into the contemporary dance field of the early twenty-first century. A written note by Butcher offers insights into her ways of thinking around these disciplinary categories as well as how they relate and complement each other:



Artists who are dancers and choreographers  
- Less definition of 'Being one or the other' Understanding processes and performance - Necessary for both and allows a much broader learning programme

Fig. 1: Fragment from Butcher's notebook (2015)

Setting the number of participants at up to twelve per workshop allowed for a sense of shared intimacy and space for Butcher as mentor to give attention to each individual practitioner. Selection was by application, with an invitation for dance artists to “reflect on and deepen their practice in a framework that combines mentoring, peer dialogue and a shared workspace” (Independent Dance, 2016).

Each Critical Pathways iteration was unique in terms of its actual format and thematic focus, at any one time reflecting Butcher's own choreographic concerns and

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Butcher's archive remains unsorted to date, which makes a detailed investigation difficult at this stage.

creative research, aligned with her ideas on how to foster an environment in which dance practitioners would be able to advance their ideas and creative processes. While the participants were working from and developing their own creative ideas, Butcher framed each workshop with a broader concept and theme. Exemplary titles are 'Out of Nothing – Tools for Research' (2014), 'Language as Source and the Territory of Experience' (2015) and 'A New Investigation – Searching for Materials – Traces of Remembrances' (2016).

Butcher shaped Critical Pathways as a laboratory, the premise of which was to allow participants to create their individual choreographic work while being amongst and with others. In this sense the workshops supported individual dance artists to develop their work in a shared space that would facilitate dialogue and exchange within a framework of researching and investigating into the choreographic. As part of this, Butcher instigated a process for each practitioner to critically self-reflect on and to reinvent their ways of working.

Butcher devised the workshops through offering stimuli to the group as a whole, while yet allowing for the development of idiosyncratic creative processes and works to emerge. In this way she facilitated dance practitioners to interact within the premise of their respective choreographic development and material. Without setting any particular requirements for participants in view of pursuing a certain style or aesthetic in their choreographic practice, the workshops on the whole dealt with meta-praxiological aspects of dance-making, as integral to actual processes of making dance. Butcher's approach to mentoring was driven by continually engaging with the question of what choreography is, focusing on investigating choreographic practice through doing.

One of Butcher's approaches to mentoring was to prompt practitioners to research into the wider history and context<sup>7</sup> of dance, within which she would ask them to explore and define their position. She also recurrently introduced conceptual ideas and approaches linked to her interest in architecture and the visual arts, which she would ask participants to engage with. Amongst these architect Bernard Tschumi's concept of a building as based on a real-life event is exemplary and the sketches and drawings in their publication *Manhattan Transcripts* (Tschumi, 1994) were key materials that Butcher drew on in several creative and pedagogic processes.

In her teaching Butcher emphasised for each dance artist to further their understanding of their materials. A complex process was involved in what she conceived this sort of understanding to entail. While I doubt that a clear formula can be drawn out from her complex practice, which involved intricate and individualised responses as well creating and navigating dialogue, a sense thereof might be drawn from the kinds of questions and prompts that Rosemary offered her mentees during their ongoing investigation into the choreographic through making. Actively working with and enquiring into notions such as 'materials', 'scores', 'pathways', 'journeys' and 'translations' was central to her creative and pedagogic practice.

**Selected fragment from Butcher's archived notebooks on Critical Pathways (date unknown)**

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<sup>7</sup> I am grateful to Gitta Wigro and Claudia Tonietto at Independent Dance for sharing an archived funding application related to Butcher's Critical Pathways workshops, in which these approaches are clearly outlined.

*Introduction*

*The work - the idea*

*Balance of discussion*

*Memory     Notebook*

*Doing writing thinking*

*How would you process your thoughts?*

*What is important?     In the thinking*

*Body History*

*Memory - Place*

*Labelling - parts of the notes*

*What if not danced*

*Questions - Gesture — ?*

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*What is there? - The Material*

*How can material echo an idea...*

*The Body is not a screen between things and ourselves; manifests only the  
individuality and the contingency of our original relation to instrumental things*

*Transfer the Building to a personal place of exploration*

## Investigating the process of 'making'

One of the key characteristics of the kind of professional training that Butcher facilitated for dance practitioners in initiatives such as Critical Pathways was that her pedagogic practice formed directly part of her own developing choreographic practice. Making work for her always involved teaching in connection to her rehearsal processes, as a space that would allow for explorations of current ideas. Conceiving “teaching [as] always [being] an important dialogue with her choreography” (‘Critical Pathways’, Independent Dance Website, 2016) created a highly specific setting and context for workshop participants, through searching for and testing ideas as well as finding ways to develop these. Along these lines, Butcher further stated: “I can’t teach outside of practice” (Butcher in Davis, Notes on Critical Pathways, 2014).



Fig. 2: Butcher (at back) teaching at Independent Dance in 2012 as part of the Investigative Practice module within the MA Dance Professional Practice, Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance in conjunction with partner organisations Siobhan Davies Dance and Independent Dance. Dancers: Katie Coe, Bettina Neuhaus, Natalie Heller; Image/Film Still: Susan Sentler

In a conversation with Kirsty Alexander and Lauren Potter, both of whom have extensive experience with and knowledge of Butcher's choreographic and pedagogic practices, both dance practitioners discussed a sense of uniqueness to Butcher's classes and workshops. Potter stated that "what was special about going to do class with Rosemary is that you felt like you were just landing in a process" (Potter, 2020). Alexander further commented: "In some ways I almost feel like she didn't teach in the way that people think of teaching. She 'worked', and we learned through her working. And we learned more through her working than we would have done if she had tried to 'teach' us" (Alexander, 2020).

The sense of having been part of a current choreographic investigation as opposed to having been 'taught something' as part of Butcher's Critical Pathways workshops was also shared by choreographer Harriet Latham, who attended Critical Pathways in 2016, having encountered Butcher as a teacher and mentor in various settings previously. Latham experienced the workshops as getting involved in Butcher's ongoing research, which in her view brought a certain seriousness to the work, and a sense of being directly and fully immersed in an actual process rather than training for a future project:

You are sort of tuning in and joining in on a journey where there is a purpose outside your own kind of learning of an interrogation... that was empowering and valuable. It just made it feel immediately kind of freer or real – we are not

pretending or experimenting as a kind of rehearsal, but this is already happening...

(Latham, 2020)

Butcher did not follow a pre-set formula with regard to process, which meant that there was an ongoing quality of searching and investigating in her choreographic and pedagogic practice. However, practitioners who knew her over decades can identify recurring themes, interests and approaches to her ways of working and teaching. Anecdotally there was an intensity to her presence and investment in the space, with a strong engagement with what was unfolding at any moment. As Alexander stated with regard to Butcher's morning classes, which took place in parallel to the Critical Pathways workshops and were attended by many workshop participants:

On the one hand, she would have a clear conceptual frame of what it was this morning class was going to be unearthing, but somehow her understanding of what that thing was, was informed by how other people responded to it and where they took it, which might be somewhere off to the left than where she thought it was going to go. But somehow her understanding of her own concept would be deepened by whatever was going on in the room. (Alexander, 2020)

According to dance practitioner and workshop participant Susan Sentler, Butcher would include her students into her moments of questioning, in this way offering a kind of layout with possibilities for participants to enter and engage with (Sentler, 2020).

Butcher addressed the ways that her teaching related to the choreographic in conversation with Susan Leigh Foster as part of a public artist talk at Tanz im August

Festival in Berlin in 2015 as follows:

The teaching and the communication between people and understanding how people respond to classes, how they respond to what I say, that is all choreographic. And I was never actually teaching the same thing, so I didn't have a template. I talked as if it was a new piece every day. I might try the same thing but respond very differently to the result and move on from there, so there was a big crossover. (Butcher in: Niederbuchner (ed.), 2016: 46)

Through the complex ways that Butcher interwove her teaching with her choreography-making, she created a shared space for all participants to engage in an investigation into the making of dance. This would mean that as teacher and mentor she would not tell and show, but lead an investigation that all participants were invited to connect with in their idiosyncratic ways.

### **Setting everything up – Notes from a first session of Critical Pathways (2013)**

In 2013 I was involved in Critical Pathways as a participant, alongside several dance artists who were in the process of developing choreographic work. My investment in the workshop was however not exclusively driven by a practitioner perspective but in tandem by an academic research agenda that was concerned with the conception and articulation of Butcher's choreographic practice<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> As part of this engagement a complex array of perspectives and involvements were at play on my behalf,



In presenting my notes from this iteration of Critical Pathways, my focus remains on the mentoring practice of Butcher (rather than referring to the development of my own practice at the time), and in particular with the ways that she conceptually set up the workshop in processual terms. I deliberately share these notes here in the present tense, in which they were recorded.

### *Critical Pathways Day One*

*22 January 2013*

The first day of the workshop, as Butcher states, is about ‘setting everything up’. All participants were selected on the premise that they are coming into this workshop series with ‘something that is on the way’, already in the process of developing, in varying stages. With regard to current dance practices, Butcher notes a sense of not being able to state what it is that is being done in dance, emphasising that it is important to engage with the dilemma that what is trained in dance and what is current are not in sync. She further underlines the importance of conceptual work, stating that the amount of thinking that each participant needs to do before each Critical Pathways session is considerable. An initial provocation Butcher offers is for each practitioner to consider their strands of influences in terms of the wider history of dance:

What has influenced you? What have you missed out to be influenced on? You are part of a world, an engagement with performance structure. (Butcher, 2013)

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merging aspects of participant observation with approaches from the area of practice research.

Butcher connects a great part of her own influences to Judson Dance Theater, which took place in New York City in the 1960s, the 'rawness' of which, according to her, has been difficult to trace since.<sup>9</sup> She points to André Lepecki's edited collection *Dance* (Lepecki (ed.), 2012), which surveys developments in dance from the 1950s onwards, coinciding with her own lifetime and asks a key question (that retains acute relevance several years later): "Who is included in these histories, and who is not?" (Butcher, 2013).

Butcher further refers to Tracey Warr's edited collection *The Artist's Body* (Warr (ed.), 2012) which presents a selection of artists that use their bodies in their artwork, whilst not being aligned with the area of dance as such, and asks:

What is the place of choreography if it can exist in a work of art without being choreographed? How can the body stay choreographed and remain current?  
(Butcher, 2013)

Butcher asks the participants to actively consider the history of dance and to engage with its heritage. This might be done through selecting aspects of practices, both on an intellectual and a physical level, in a process of reinterpretation. She further invites everybody to identify the things that they have been moved by, and try to find out why they have been moved, offering the following questions to work with:

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<sup>9</sup> Butcher spent time in New York City in the early 1970s where she met and also worked with many of the practitioners that had formed part of the events at Judson Church a few years earlier. In 2015 she stated that while the movement influenced her strongly, she always retained her own sense of an aesthetic (see Butcher in Gareis, 2015: 1).

What do you need in order to do what you do? Who else has been working in this way? Whose processes are relevant? (Butcher, 2013)

Butcher states that this process is not about altering their work, but a way of actively pursuing it. To instigate this process of selecting, reflecting and reconceiving, she references artist Susan Hiller's installation *From the Free Museum 1991-6*.

(In this work Hiller presented fifty labelled cardboard boxes with archive materials, such as found objects and photocopies, which constitute her collection of ephemera that grew over five years. They include a mixture of items with historical artefacts placed alongside everyday articles and personal memorabilia: "[M]ost of the displayed objects came from the artist's personal collections and were seamlessly slotted into what Hiller called 'the gaps of the things left out'" (Tate Research Publication, 2017). The work has been characterised as an "artistic intervention" that "leads Susan Hiller and (some of) her audiences to consider what has been edited out, and the intellectual, cultural and political rationales for such exclusions" (Tate Research Publication, 2017).)

Taking inspiration from Hiller's installation and their practice of collecting and assembling, Butcher asks the participants to collect a variety of stuff relevant to their work. She emphasises the importance of each practitioner making their own collection as part of a broader process of redefining their work. She further invites them to keep an account of their creative processes and to articulate where they have started from to the current stage, in order to assess where they are at any moment in the making, also considering what they hope to achieve until an agreed sharing.

A next step is for each practitioner to redefine the "nature of the thing they are concerned with" (Butcher, 2013). This process of redefining will involve the finding of

other possibilities of developing the material than processes previously drawn on. Butcher mentions the importance of building confidence through always considering that what they are doing and investigating is something they want – what needs to be defined is the visibility of this interest or idea. Her mentoring process will involve encouraging each practitioner to make their own alterations.

### **Selected fragment from Butcher's archived notebooks on Critical Pathways (2015)**

#### Preparation

*Sourcing the memory*

*the place*

*Collections of ideas associated to self – related to place*

*attachment:*

*memory*

#### Dream Mapping?

*Photographs that give more texture to the idea to help the visibility –*

*Maybe like the drawings of Hiller*

*Give an emphasis to something else - that can also be described through language*

From the physicality

Score what you have - in terms of a visual language using the concept —

Write the physicality

experience

in terms of IDENTIFICATION of Labels

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Write the language —

Body as centre to the practice

DOING from Thinking

1<sup>st</sup> stage

Making the Body move

Analyse the process —

Abstract the terminology

To be somewhere, inhabited by, within

*Reminded of — —*

*Areas of <—————>*

*— — — — physicality to describe*

*Not what you made*

*What you were exploring in terms of*

*Texture/skin/internal association*

*Spatial context —*

*Axis*

### **‘Language as Source’**

A significant characteristic to Rosemary’s pedagogic and artistic practice was her highly idiosyncratic use of language. In many conversations with those who knew and worked with Butcher, the ways she used language was highlighted as a key influence and special experience. In a public conversation with Tanz im August artistic director Virve Sutinen and choreographer Lucinda Childs in the context of Butcher’s retrospective event *Memory in the Present Tense* (Akademie der Künste, Tanz im August, Berlin 2015), Butcher commented on her preoccupation with her archive in thematising the role of language:

I was trying to think a lot about the basis of how choreography is made, or how you make work without for instance demonstration, without putting things in a particular prominent position, and I thought that language and using language is central to the way pieces evolve with me. A lot of other things come in, but it is the interpretation of an idea through language, picked up by the right performers, who then in a way inhabit this territory through their understanding of that communication. (Butcher in Niederbuchner (ed.), 2016: 56)

Butcher explained to me once in a private conversation that she had been strongly influenced by the ways that visual artists and architects spoke, from her early collaborations in the late 1970s onwards. Artist Heinz-Dieter Pietsch and architect John Lyall are amongst the early encounters with practitioners from these disciplines that Butcher remained strongly connected with and invested in throughout her life. Many of her creative inspirations were drawn from these fields, which would further bring related vocabulary into her creative processes.

Butcher's creative interest in ruins and portraiture are examples here, and looking across Butcher's lifetime of works, it becomes apparent that certain themes preoccupied her throughout her professional life. Her last choreographic works *Secrets of the Open Sea* and *The Test Pieces* constituted an investigation into the language used in her works from the 1980s. The interest in architectural ruins had initially been conceived in collaboration with artist Pietsch as part of the work *Spaces 4* (Pietsch, 2017).



Fig. 3: Butcher's film installation *Secrets of the Open Sea*, film: Sam Williams, dancer: Lucy Suggate, Tanz im August Festival, Akademie der Künste Berlin, 2015. Photograph: Sam Williams

Yet it was not only the use of specific vocabulary that would have an impact on those who worked with her, but also a specific way of placing words in terms of timing and tone, through which Butcher seemed to drive her creative practice. Carolyn Roy, who witnessed Butcher as a teacher in several instances<sup>10</sup>, stated:

One thing I really rated with Rosemary is the way she would put the words into the space. And I think that's something I learned from Rosemary, how to offer words as a teacher, how to offer words into the space without them being directive, to open words as possibilities, drop them into the space to resonate. (Roy, 2020)

<sup>10</sup> Roy attended morning classes as well as the Critical Pathways workshop at Independent Dance in 2014.



The particularity of Butcher's use of language has been discussed by many dancers and choreographers who worked with her. At a memorial event<sup>11</sup> at Independent Dance in December 2016 dancer and choreographer Jonathan Burrows commented that Butcher's instructions had a level of complexity and obscurity that would not allow the dancers to understand them and 'carry them out' in any straight-forward sense. As he stated, dancers however engaged with these instructions anyway, without necessarily understanding them. Experiencing and witnessing Butcher's language myself on many occasions, it seemed that through the ways that dancers engaged to process her abstract language – through moving – that choreographic material would emerge.

*Take a form from one place*

*Keep a sense of this and let it dissolve somewhere else*

*Finding the Rules as Episodes to Self*

*Surfaces of the body imprinting on another surface*

*Taking away – imprint left behind – refit into that*

*Points in space of body*

*Translate that into the space*

*Accumulate the imprint*

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<sup>11</sup> *Memory at Work: Rosemary Butcher in the Present Tense*, event curated by Kirsty Alexander, Lauren Potter, Stefanie Sachsenmaier and Independent Dance, Siobhan Davies Dance Studios, London, 17 December 2016.

(Butcher's instructions as recorded by Lauren Potter, Critical Pathways, 2016)

Potter remembered her experience of Butcher's language as follows:

It feels like the language is so strong and it's very particular. But also, you don't have to 'get' it... it's something, she is sort of holding the space, so you are in the space that's being held and maybe the way you're understanding what she is giving you isn't so specific that you have to really understand the thread she's on – maybe I'm getting a very different understanding... But because I am involved in my understanding of something, it doesn't really matter. As long as all the people in the room are really getting something, it doesn't matter if it's 'the thing', because it's so wide and broad... but actually it's very specific! (Potter, 2020)

As Potter further explained, "if you tried to understand [what she said], you wouldn't move. But actually, if you allowed yourself to embrace that imaginatively and creatively, it would take you on a journey" (Potter, 2020). Butcher herself stated as part of Critical Pathways in 2014 that she was not always sure if what she is asking is possible or not (see Davis, 2014). What seemed to matter to her was for the dancers to engage with the ideas and concepts, as they moved, and to be on a 'journey', as Butcher often called it. Dance practitioner Yuka Negoro, who took part in the 2016 Critical Pathways workshop, stated that it was difficult to understand what Butcher said and shared at the time:

At times she took time to choose each word to express herself, as if questioning herself while speaking. It was quite peculiar yet abstract. Her words linger, could take years and experience to understand. But when they finally click, they have the power to transform my perception of dance radically. (Negoro, 2020).

Butcher measured her timing of instructions and choice of language, its layering over time in the space, in direct relation to what was unfolding in the space. Alexander explained that it never seemed to her as though Butcher was “making it up from some random place, but she was identifying what’s happening and articulating its next possibility” (Alexander, 2020).

Further, according to Potter, Butcher tended to say relatively little during a session, and leaving twenty to thirty minutes between providing instructions to dancers was not uncommon for her, which meant that there was a confidence and trust in the exploration taking place and allowing space for this (Potter, 2020).

Sentler, a professional dance teacher herself, described that she experienced Butcher’s way of speaking as creating openings in her prompts, stressing the importance of pauses and listening:

The 'listening' is that of a full embodied one and of multiple senses... by both Rosemary and the participants. The 'gaps', the 'pauses' giving time for her to see, to sense what was happening in the spatial landscape... allowing her to drop in or reiterate in a different way another image/word/quality/possibility. The listening for the participants to be what they can take from her language, from the images that

collide over time, to the others in space, to the sound, to the moment. (Sentler, 2020)

Further, Sentler stated that Butcher offered through her language “limitation(s) / anchor(s), but not a specific direction of what to do... [...] allowing space for both maker and dancer to find new/novel avenues in the improvisational exploration” (Sentler, 2020).

**Selected fragment from Butcher’s archived notebooks – context unknown (2015)**

*The vessel*

*the container*

*Information of —*

*Body as container*

*Covering - opening —*

*[...] to the surface*

*— Edging towards the front —*

*Pressure of the open surface*

*against the edge*

*[...]*

*PLACE*

-----

*The measuring of the shifts*

*Measuring of the shifts in the internal structure*

-----

*[...]*

*Sense of placement*

*How does it exist —*

*Attention to detail*

*organising the placement*

*Sense of CONTAINING information*

*Breakdown into threads*

*Strands of influence*

*Strands of remnants*

*Organisation of ideas in space*

*What goes where — Density/lightness*  
*MEASURING — How near — or far to the Edge*  
*in terms of the smaller places*  
*— the not so considered*

### **Ideas, Materials, Scores...**

In her teaching and choreography-making Butcher tended to return to and revisit materials previously created, continually questioning and further investigating these, a process through which she would identify and develop an idea. “Staying in the predicament”, according to Sentler, was advice offered by Butcher in order “to find something novel beyond your default”. Butcher placed an emphasis on “not preparing the material but preparing the ground” (Sentler, 2020). In 2014 she commented on the changing conception of what constituted ‘material’ for dance practitioners of different generations:

I think that finding material is probably one of the hardest things in artistic terms that there is. Also, material is not necessarily seen in quite the same way now, probably, as part of my earlier generation [...]. Now I think materials are seen slightly differently and conceptual work is viewed against the aesthetic and against the material, arguably looked at very differently. But you can’t pretend to work that

way, you can only work with what you know about, which I think is very significant. (Butcher, 2014)

Materials would be worked into a 'score', which involved processes of mapping and structuring. While these terms are familiar to dance practitioners, it is worthwhile questioning what they meant to Butcher in actional terms. Rather than clearly outlining and defining her own terminology, however, she continually pursued to investigate such key terms that formed part of her language in the studio, as the following questions demonstrate, which she asked practitioners to consider as part of her teaching:

What is a score?

What is the translation of a score?

What does the score do to your material?

(Butcher quoted by Sentler, 2020)

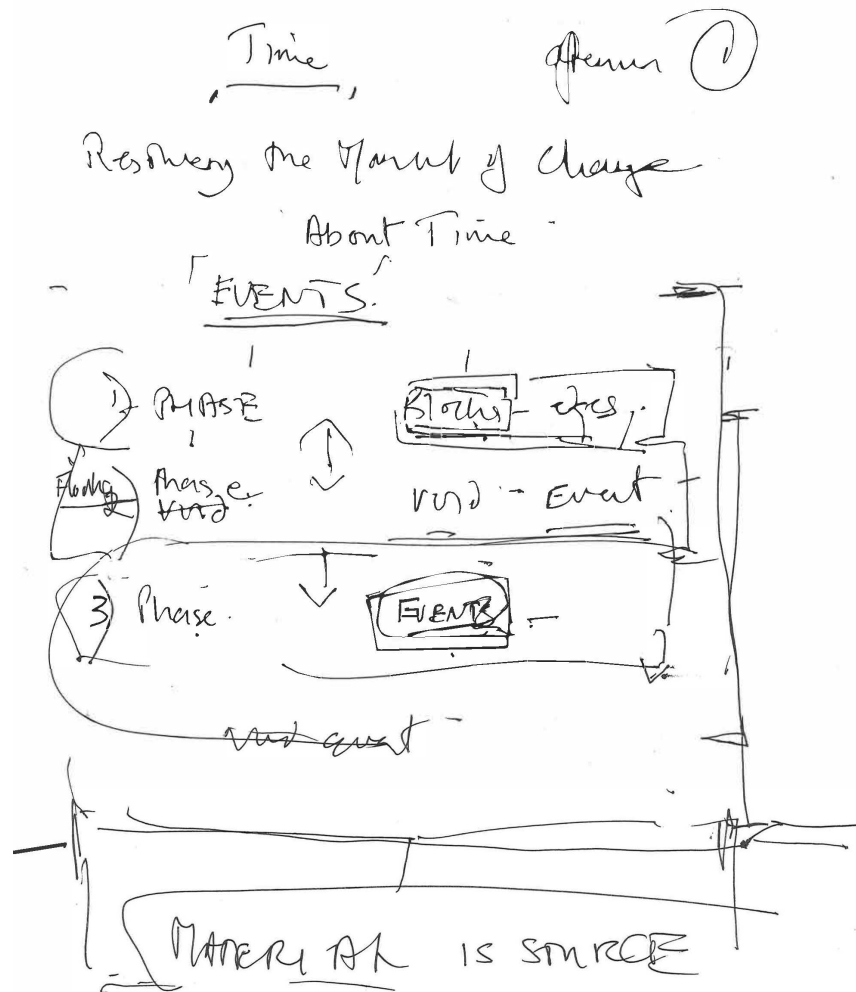


Fig. 4: Example of a score as part of Butcher's rehearsal process of *The Test Pieces*, 2015

At times Butcher would set short exercises that allowed practitioners to further explore and refine their scores, as in the 'doing' of a longer score within a very short amount of time, such as two minutes: "How does this limited time affect the movement, the idea, the score?" (Butcher quoted in Davis, 2014).

Further recurring tasks included translating a movement score into a graph or drawing, which in return was to be translated again into new movement material. In this context Butcher often used Tschumi's architectural drawings as a visual template. The process of translating material into various forms, building and accumulating with



a sense of continual questioning, was crucial to her practice.

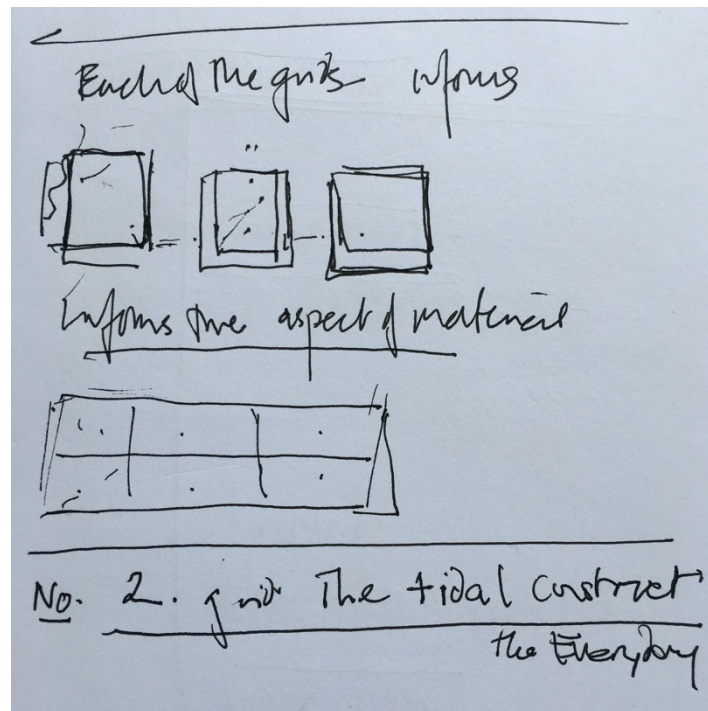


Fig. 5: Fragment from Butcher's notebook (around 2014)

Sentler remembered Butcher encouraging practitioners to place images on a grid, in the context of which she introduced German artist Alexandra Bircken's work *Drape* (2007) as a stimulus:

The images through this physicalised manner have the potential to collapse, collide, transform, overlay, etc. Rosemary said: "Converging of two things, that make something else" ... "Two things together to find the third". [There was a] reconnecting of the images within the body's improvisational play through the duration of her journeys. Accumulating, but simultaneously re-iterating back to the initial imprint, noting the differences, discovering the distillation necessary to remain. (Sentler, 2020)

Moreover, Butcher would ask practitioners to record their patterns of working, which further brought a sense of critical self-reflection into their process. “Where is the place between your ideas? Note the thing that you did but isolating the intensity” (Butcher quoted by Sentler, 2020). These guiding questions and instructions once again reveal the kind of complexity to Butcher’s way of navigating and investigating processes of choreography-making.

### **Concluding Remarks**

An underlying concern of this article has been to capture something of the inspirational, creative energy that Butcher seemed to transmit when mentoring dance practitioners. Yet creative practice tends to be complex and internally contradictory, it also easily slips away and risks to disappear or become distorted when we are confronted with remembering aspects of past lived practices. And although Butcher ongoingly investigated and explored ways of using language in her choreographic and pedagogic practice, as soon as we place her words onto the page in an academic context, they easily falter and fail, in arguably different ways to those that Butcher dealt with as a choreographer.

While the materials drawn together here certainly do not offer a complete picture of the kinds of training experiences that Butcher created and facilitated, the various voices and fragments included and the ways they are positioned in relation to each other might render some of the fragmentary resonances that Butcher created and drew on in

her own set-ups of workshops and perhaps offer a way for the 'past to encounter the future'<sup>12</sup>. The inclusion of the selected dance practitioners' anecdotes relayed in this writing as well as their own interpretations of Butcher's ways of working in and of themselves contribute to the making of her legacy, in the sense that they point to the ways that Butcher's practice continues to live on and evolve in relation to a changing context and environment.

Intrinsic to the ways Butcher taught and created choreographic work was that she continually worked out the processual through persistently questioning what dance might be. Never seeming to settle on a formula that had worked before, there was an arguably timeless and endlessly adaptable inexhaustibility and curiosity to her approach to making that are key qualities of inventive practice.

Critical Pathways was one of the spaces that Butcher created, in which she was able to action the level of questioning she pursued throughout her working life. The workshop series at Independent Dance forms one important aspect of the history of the organisation alongside and in tandem with the history of Butcher as choreographer, teacher and mentor – roles that, as I have discussed, were closely connected and entangled throughout her professional career. Whilst the workshops were aimed at dancers who also conceive of themselves as choreographers, her teaching stimulated a further questioning of these delineators. As dance practitioner Latham stated, when participating in Butcher's workshops she did not have to "hold on to the dancer" in her, and while movement was central to her experience of working with Butcher, "there was the conceptual, physical thinker and physical experience of how I tune and tap into that as a kind of practice" that created a shift for her (Latham, 2020).

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<sup>12</sup> See again Lee in Leader (ed.) 2015: 129.

Latham's statement seems indicative of the particular depth and complexity that Butcher created and shaped in her teaching and mentoring practice, which anecdotally triggered a change in ways of thinking and working in many practitioners that I have been in conversation with. Butcher's long-term fascination with the themes of time and memory in some sense mirror her ongoing actions of revisiting, reinvestigating and reconceiving not only of material created, but the potential understanding and conception of the very notions of creative ideas, materials and scores themselves. The instigation of such an intricate level of investigation took place alongside her invitation for workshop participants to outline their relationship to the wider legacy of dance. It is in these concrete actions that questions of who has been included and excluded in histories of dance, and how individual practitioners relate to these histories, held a key importance in Butcher's process – questions which remain crucial for the wider field of dance to consider further. Butcher's practice and teaching, which continually sought to challenge traditional dance conventions, provided an impulse and space for renewal and reinvention, in which looking back formed part of looking ahead, as part of choreographic processes that continually questioned what choreography and dance might not only be, but also become.

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Harriet Latham, July 2020

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Heinz-Dieter Pietsch, January 2016

Carolyn Roy, July 2020

Susan Sentler, July 2020

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