

## Collaboration: The Coexistence of Oil and Water?

*Filmmaker Mirra Bank catches the turmoil and creative cooperation involved when Pilobolus Dance Theatre made a work about the Holocaust with Maurice Sendak*

by Leandro Damasco

The one dance company that persuaded me to pursue a dance career during my undergraduate studies was Pilobolus Dance Theatre. I was intrigued by the ensemble's creativity and use of bodily architectural structure to illustrate the endless beauty and strength of the human body and the human condition in motion. I was hungry to be part of their creative process, so much so that I auditioned at one time in my career. Even though I was cut towards the last rounds of the audition, I got a glimpse of how they worked. For Pilobolus, it was all about collaborating with each other through exploration of movement ideas.

Now, if you can't go to an audition or see Pilobolus live, a 2002 film by Mirra Bank titled *Last Dance* gives insight into how Pilobolus works between its three artistic directors Robby Barnett, Michael Tracey, Jonathan Wolken, and the dancers. What's interesting about this film is that it was also Pilobolus' first time collaborating with an outside artist. Known for his grotesque children fantasies, Maurice Sendak, a storyteller, a writer, and the author of the popular *Where the Wild Things Are*, wanted to create a visual story through dance about the Holocaust. Although Sendak did not directly experience the devastation of a Nazi concentration camp, he says that it affected his entire Jewish family forever and that he will always have that lineage of being a Holocaust victim.

Partaking in a creative endeavor that combines high caliber dance performance with such a devastating moment in human history requires problem-solving and coordination from all its collaborators and contributors. Learning how to collaborate is an important skill for any dancer to have when pursuing a professional company life. Cognitive scientists have even discovered that although, "There is some experimental evidence of greater output when people perform problem-solving tasks alone," it works even better, "when a task is challenging and paired participants are familiar with each other" (Stevens and Leach). Known for their highly physical, acrobatic and strength, Pilobolus has clearly established their own process and method of aesthetic and creation. Artistic Director Robby Barnett says that "they usually take two weeks to just to play" and come up with ideas with one another when creating a new piece.

Working outside of their normal process provides much of the drama in the film as they brought in Sendak as another creative force. It was like having too many cooks in the kitchen. In the beginning, Wolken, one of the artistic directors of Pilobolus, would often argue with Sendak that they should just focus on creating movement, which is what they were used to doing, rather than creating a storyline about the Holocaust. It was like trying to mix oil with water, and oftentimes everyone was not on the same page. Luckily, the dancers came in with open minds and were always ready to improvise and create, even when the five directors couldn't agree on a choreographic approach, from the genesis of the piece to how they should end it. Sendak said at

one point that if Pilobolus continued their ways of creation, there was no need for him to be there. Sendek specializes in storytelling, and even though there wasn't a set story, he was adamant that there are endless stories to be told about the holocaust.

Learning how to tell a story is a creative skill for any dancer to have and often is more successful when collaborating with others, especially when tackling such a sensitive subject. Eventually, the Pilobolus directors agreed with Sendek that there needed to be a sense of characterization for each dancer that could then inform the movement vocabulary. Barnett and Tracey understood that they had to change their way of working to keep Sendek on board. "The practice of collaboration makes dialogues and exchanges explicit, both in the processes of creating and in the products of collaboration" (Barbour). Through trial and error and open communication between all the contributors, *A Selection* was premiered at the Joyce Theater in New York, in 1999. It was a story about five Jews just missing the train to safety, with the character of Death deciding who lives and who dies.

Ann Marie Thomson, an adjunct assistant professor in the School of Public and Environmental Affairs at Indiana University, describes five variables in the collaboration process (Thompson). One of them is "governance," which involves participative decision-making and creating a structure of goals through shared power arrangements. Agreeing to giving each dancer a character allowed a framework for both Pilobolus and Sendek to proceed with the creation process. Sendek focused heavily on the characterizations of each dancer and collaborated with the costume designer to help bring that character into life. The directors of Pilobolus focused on the movement that correlated to each character as well as working closely with the composers to inform movement through the music. There were disputes among the collaborators and delegating who does what seemed to be the first major hurdle the creatives in this film had to conquer.

To parallel the collaboration between Pilobolus and Sendek, director Mirra Bank interjected images in the beginning about Theresienstadt, a real concentration camp that was presented as a model camp, where the Nazis produced a propaganda film in order to deceive the entire world about what was going on in Europe (Margry). This was itself a collaboration between the Nazi government, actual members of the military and police, and non-Jews who cooperated—a very different kind of collaboration. They all aimed to persuade the world by focusing on "happy" Jewish children in the camp playing and singing. No one knew for the longest time that they would later be secretly shipped away to Auschwitz and be exterminated.

Each role in a collaboration, whether big or small, is like a cog in a bigger machine and would be rendered useless if each role did not do their jobs. It is the job of the Pilobolus dancers to continually improvise to show their directors what is possible when it comes to movement, then to learn and embody the vision their directors want. It is the job of the creatives to work harmoniously at coming up with an end product, which I believe was successful in this case. Barnett said that conflict was a necessary evil as long as the social contract was not breached.

All in all, this film does a great job in showing all the ups and downs of a collaborative journey. The film can get slow at times but in the end wraps up wonderfully by alternating excerpts of the performance with rehearsal scenes back in the rehearsal studio. This allows the viewer to see the

progress, all the decision- making, and all the agreements the creatives had to make to successfully come up with a new performance piece, even when the going got rough. Collaboration is the very essence of what Mirra Bank wanted to portray in this film, with *Pilobolus* as an example of what many dance companies go through. It showcases all who were involved, from musicians, to the scenic designers, costume designers and even a photographer from the *New York Times*.

This film is a for all dancers interested in the collaborative process and the skills you need for a method used by all dance companies. How you communicate often dictates the ultimate success of the creation. It is almost like trying to mix oil and water—it always seems to be impossible if you forget that they can both coexist together in harmony.

#### Sources cited

- Barbour, Karen N. “Sustainable Dance Making: Dancers and Choreographers in Collaboration.” *Brolga*, June 2008, p. 44.  
[researchcommons.waikato.ac.nz/bitstream/handle/10289/3211/BarbourBrolga.pdf;sequence=3](http://researchcommons.waikato.ac.nz/bitstream/handle/10289/3211/BarbourBrolga.pdf;sequence=3).
- Margry, Karel. “‘Theresienstadt’ (1944–1945): The Nazi Propaganda Film Depicting the Concentration Camp as Paradise.” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 15 Sept. 2006, p. 145., doi:10.1080/01439689200260091.
- Sevens, Catherine J, and James Leach. “Bodystorming: Effects of Collaboration and Familiarity on Improvising Contemporary Dance.” *Cognitive Processing*, 2 Aug. 2015, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10339-015-0682-0>.
- Thomson, A. M. and Perry, J. L. (2006), Collaboration Processes: Inside the Black Box. *Public Administration Review*, 66: 20-32. doi:10.1111/j.1540-6210.2006.00663.x

*Leandro Damasco is a dancer/choreographer now in his second year of a Dance MFA at the University of California, Irvine.*