

The Art of Dance in a Frozen Landscape

by Efva Lilja, choreographer

translated by Frank Perry

Why would a choreographer go to the Arctic to work? Why expose a dancer's body to the cold she would otherwise try so hard to avoid? Why stage dances in surroundings where there is no audience?

The Preliminaries

In January 2001, I wrote a letter to the Polar Research Secretariat of Sweden's Royal Academy of Sciences informing them of my interest in taking part in the expedition to the Arctic Ocean in 2002. The expedition was to last for seven weeks from 20/4 – 7/6. I received a letter confirming I was going in October and started making preparations. In November, the Polar Research Secretariat arranged an introductory weekend on board the ice-breaker Oden, then moored in Luleå. It was there the members of the expedition and some of the crew members got to know one another and were informed about the research projects that would be carried out during the expedition. We were also given a lecture on cold weather and the injuries cold can cause together with information about life on board. During the course of that winter we were given supplementary information and those of us who would be working on the ice received rifle training owing to the danger posed by polar bears. In mid-April we assembled in Gothenburg – 32 research scientists, 22 crew members, 5 officials of the Polar Research secretariat and the undersigned – to get settled on board and on April 20 the Oden left harbour with a great deal of pomp and circumstance. This was the first time an expedition to the Arctic had left so early in the year. That far north it was still winter. Normally expeditions go in July – August.

During the preparatory period, my participation in the expedition attracted a lot of attention, particularly in the media. The expectations just kept growing ... at a time when it was vital for me to be left in peace to allow myself the opportunity to enter deeply into the whole process without the pressure of time. My stated ambition at the time for our departure was that the outcome of my work on the ice should be a short dance film for SVT Fiktion, the foundations of a new choreographic work whose premiere was planned for the inaugural week of the Ice Globe Theatre in Jukkasjärvi, in the very north of Sweden, in January 2003 as well as a written commentary on my work. How things turned out is made clear in the text that follows as well as in a travel journal I kept during the expedition. The latter describes life on board, the impact of the practical considerations and the physical conditions on the work I did, the social environment and the natural world. This may be necessary.

The Arctic is like nowhere else.

Observations, Thoughts and Reflections during the Expedition

A Few Comments prior to Reading

Mystery is what entices body and mind to go beyond the ordinary. That which cannot be defined and not even timidity can resist. The mysterious would rather be approached with adulation or, in some cases, in torment. Seductively alluring, threatening, terrifying... the feelings, the intellect can become totally engaged with this indefinable something and it needs to be approached with a firm resolve, a keen mind and memory. You have to make an effort but the struggle is well worth the trouble.

Without mystery the environment becomes one-dimensional. Scientists, both men and women, search astutely for what will increase our knowledge and make the world more comprehensible, easier to deal with and more manageable. Mystery is there somewhere as the stimulus that entices, the intangible something that always slips away. I am seduced. I am affected by the sensual aspect of what I experience, by rage and hate during confrontation, by joy in the experience of completeness. Slipping around inside the sphere of mystery invoked by what is intangible in the world involves self-exposure, laying oneself open.

Pretty much every one of us tends to wobble around our lives. We step sure-footedly forward, start to lose our balance and then get the jitters. It is easy to slip and lose your direction.

The Arctic has always exerted a mysterious fascination for me. A lifelong dream I had been incapable of revealing. This vast expanse around the North Pole is made up for the most part of water. Frozen water. Incredibly deep water. In this deep-frozen whiteness, a continuous but imperceptible motion occurs. The ice drifts, is set in motion by the wind, breaks up from the pressure of the tides, is coloured by the continually changing light or submerged in the absolute darkness of the polar winter. Nothing is solid, and yet there is a powerful impression of stillness here. The waiting perhaps – and the silence.

What we call insight is to be found in silence. Every human being has to deal with their own silence, their own loneliness. There is so much stirring within us, inside the shell of our bodies. We have to listen if we are to attain any kind of intelligibility. If I dare eavesdrop on my own silence, I can find joy in all the insight and understanding it contains. In this way the desire to eavesdrop on other bodies is woken. I want to know. I can see the movement. Bodies, as human dwelling-places, communicate in movement. Silently. Silently. Silently. If it is not to fade away, the inner life must be nourished and stimulated.

I have made my way here to find the time and the opportunity to find my relation to all this. To experiment with both my sense of movement and my ideas in relation to this dream. To investigate what the cold, the ice, the snow and the whole of this apparently abandoned place will do to me. People who live at northern latitudes move in a different way to those who live in warmer climates. The further north I get, the slower and more restrained movement becomes. Gestural language becomes more “refined” and words become sparse. The colours pale. We become increasingly quiet-spoken and patient. The cold forces us to constrain our bodies, to stop wasting heat. The darkness sets a different rhythm and the natural world makes its considerable resistance felt.

What was it that made people continue northwards, that made them defy the cold and the dark? How does the present relate to what has been? Where does my own longing come from?

Human life is all but impossible in the Arctic. Everything is white – albeit in a thousand different shades and now in April/May, here as far north as one can go, it is still so cold the effort to speak is painful. The silence contains sounds. The sea, the ice, the snow and the wind produce their own sounds. There are quiet a few animals.

In this place I seek to make space for my thoughts about time and the concept of time, to muse on it. I am trying to understand our endless hunger for history, for our roots, to make it all intelligible. What sets its stamp on us and our linguistic codes? I make no pretension to scientific skills. I am a subjective interpreter of signs, travelling through a frozen world. I write down my thoughts and observations to share with the curious. As an artist I make use of myself. My body is at the disposal of this process, my mind gropes for intellectual codes to capture transient thoughts and regain control over the present.

Anxiety is a way of expressing this helpless fumbling. Inevitably so, if one abandons what is already familiar. Like steering a course through uncharted waters. It is thrilling, exhilarating and marvellously pleasurable, only then to come up against the enormous resistance of so much that cannot be grasped and be forced into a fall with nothing to cushion the landing. It hurts. At this point it is essential to be aware of that sense of enticing mystery to provide the strength required to start again. Next time. I'll find out next time. This cannot be achieved without a certain degree of both pleasure and suffering. I want to lay myself open. I think many people will recognise themselves in this – and all the better for a bit of mystery.

Cold as Ice

I did not feel cold my first time out on the ice. I stood, sat, walked and lay out on the snow for just over three hours. I tasted it. Testing its consistency. Astonished by all the colours. Trying to comprehend...

The snow here is dryer than any snow I have ever encountered. It goes flying like dust. When I stamp on it, it whirls up in clouds. Weightless. It tastes of air. Not the slightest bit like the snow I have tasted at home. The outer surface of new ice is salt but the only taste the snow has is that of coldness. The air is very dry. The mucous membranes of the body thicken and your hair becomes brittle and unruly. There is the crackle of static electricity on board and it is light. The sun shines just as brightly night and day. It never even approaches the horizon, just turns circles round the heavens. Dazzling.

It is easy to lose your sense of time since light no longer determines the extent of the day. We keep time on board through our routines and habits, but nature itself knows neither day nor night. The winds blow. The chill factor can bring the temperature down to -45° but the cold is not excruciating. The colder it gets, the more beautiful the light and the ice crystals become. That is the beauty I find myself in.

I maintain body warmth by keeping as much of my body as possible covered. I keep the heat in by keeping my movements contained. I keep my arms and legs moving close to

my trunk. When I rest, I huddle up or dig myself in. I close my mouth and close off myself. The cold of the ice makes movements more constrained. Tight.

What I Have to Do

There are many different things underlying what a movement expresses and it can easily deceive. To get to the meaning, I tear away its skin (of necessity, if I am to get to the heart of it.) The bits left over become debris in the rubbish dump of all that is non-essential. This is enormously pleasurable work at times.

Finding what I have been looking for so long is wonderful. I could not bear to be without that moment when one movement yields naturally to become another. The inexpressible moves away into silence. A certain degree of skill and time for the process to deepen are required if the search is to succeed. Time is the most difficult thing to manage. And yet what is clear at the same time is that it is often when conditions are at their very worst that it happens. That is when creativity is challenged and is at its strongest. Crisis. Enormous tension. Anxiety. Wounds heal and clouds disperse without anyone missing them. A time of pleasure and joy is succeeded by the most demanding of challenges. And then you're back in the same place again. You have to fight on...

There are no movements left to discover. The human body and its movement have been thoroughly analysed from kinetic, medical, social and anthropological perspectives – indeed, from any conceivable viewpoint. What remains as an inexhaustible source to be explored is the linguistic perspective and how this relates to dance as an art form. I put myself through what I want to have tested. I create experiments inside my own body. This helps my ideas to form. My experience is stored in my memory. What happens on the outside corresponds to its equivalent on the inside. The work consists of repetition. Over and over again. Desire and aversion. Happiness and anxiety. All the opposites, in fact, that provide both life and work with their dynamism. My sense of my own worth requires me to be responsible for myself and my dreams. The Arctic is part of that. I am doing what I have to do.

Dance

The vast expanses of ice, the deep-frozen emptiness here, create the conditions for the mind to roam freely. No impulses to interrupt you, nothing irrelevant can intrude... There is a kind of spiritual purity here, if I am to be allowed to romanticise the situation ever so slightly. It gets a lot less romantic when it comes to a direct, bodily confrontation with ice, snow and cold. I make my way out into the whiteness on a frozen crust of snow, imagine that I am safe and then step through up to my thighs and get stuck. I come across soft loose snow and race swiftly ahead only to crash into a block of ice and come to a dead stop. The ice fissures with the ebb and flow of the tide and then the threat is the sea in the form of a hole in the ice or an open channel. The cold squeezes your body, biting and ripping at exposed patches of skin. You have to be on guard. While the mind may be free to wander, the body has to move with greater reluctance. I keep my mouth closed.

Every step in the snow meets a resistance that increases the dynamic effect. The resistance has to be fought against. I have to put my back into it. To struggle. Even

when my steps are easier, on the crust, my body is under strain. The readiness has to be constantly in place in case I step through the snow or fall over. Hence the straining of the body. And so I choose to lie down. The weight of the body is displaced over a much larger surface when lying, making it easier for the frozen crust to support it. The body can find some rest when confident of being held up and its movements become softer. In a dip or in the shelter of an ice-block there is some protection from the wind. Resting is easier. In this way some of the preconditions for my work on the ice start to define themselves. Slowly I learn to read the changes in the whiteness. To make the most of the moment.

I improvise on the basis of the impulses I receive from the physical conditions, the colours in the whiteness, the shape of the ice, its great ramparts and dams. I use my fear of polar bears, of crevasses, of all the various dangers I fail to comprehend. I use my fascination and pleasure in the unending beauty nature offers. I listen within and trust in my intuition and my feelings. On other days an intellectual struggle is waged in which I rigorously criticise everything I previously gained. Why? To what end? I try to discern any insights I may have made, to incorporate them into the choreographic process and the next time I go out on the ice it is with choreographed sequences of movements that have to be tested.

The requirements of body and mind interact in a fundamental way in the creative process. While the work I do on the ice is concrete, tangible in a practical sense, that work has still to be combined with an intellectual process if it is to be given choreographic form. It has to be brought together with conscious intention and will if the meaning of its substance is to be revealed.

I struggle with myself in the battle between meaning and meaninglessness. Life offers resistance. I do not give in easily, I have been hardened. The good, the beautiful, desire and pleasure have to be set against their opposites for us to be able to experience them. How could we express a view about what is beautiful, if we were not also familiar with what is ugly. We have to take care as well not to become too immersed in what is agreeable. Here, in the Arctic Ocean, there is a great risk of simply drowning in the beauty. But life cannot just be pleasant. As human beings we develop from encountering resistance, emotional extremes such as passion or suffering increase the intensity of our lives and losing oneself to desire is wonderful.

Another difficulty with staging dances on the ice is that the movement gets lost in all the clothes. The cold requires one to wear thick layers and the safety rules aboard ship insist on the wearing of a life-jacket overall. This kind of overall is a wind-proof, incredibly warm thermos-like garment that is buoyant in case I should “fall in”. All this to have a chance of surviving. It could take a while to fish me out. I like my brilliant orange overall, but it is a bit like moving around in a thermos. There is always a certain distance between my body and its external envelope. It has the effect of swamping particular movements and as a result the dynamic effect disappears. In addition the strong light is dazzling and I have to use my glacier goggles. I pull my leather helmet with its fur lining down over my ears. A scarf around my chin. Thick padded gloves and boots complete my encapsulation. This is the get-up in which I dance.

I am looking for myself. Small bits of the puzzle are scattered here and there. Some part of the whole is to be found in the work, another in the Arctic.

I can experience what my own movement expresses from within, or it can be experienced by those around me. Powerful feelings and their expression are often intensified by the fact of someone watching. It is for this reason artists make their work available to the observer. The dance comes into being only in the encounter with the audience, the meaning of the dance only happens in the awareness of the audience. It is then movement is experienced and evaluated. What is it that makes the whole thing intelligible?

The intention, the will. If I want to make a discovery, my inner life (my will, mind and memory) is set in motion and new meanings are created. When I put my trust in my own capacity for insight, I accept the experiences I have as the response. I create my own meaning. This is my privilege as the audience, my privilege as the person addressed. Cultural and social codes are an obvious part of the context.

We see what we want to see, hear what we want to hear. The eye can deceive both the taste of the palate and the nose's delicate sense of smell. This is how we put together the pieces of the puzzle that is our way of seeing reality. We can manipulate our awareness of feeling. With a sufficiently strong incentive we can endure great pain. Sometimes I think this is easier for certain people that affirming their desire. Or, in order to avoid all these powerful feelings, we set limits to our lives within a more restricted sphere of security and certainty. Then we refrain from powerful movements. The puzzle may be easier to lay out if there are fewer pieces.

A work of art, a dance performance or a musical one, requires the participation of the observer. Contemporary art involves forms of expression grounded within a contemporary description of history, using codes that are intelligible on the basis of one's cultural affinities. But you still have to have the desire, the will. The reluctance to accept experience that cannot be predicted means that the ego becomes detached from any potential encounter. This results in boredom, a feeling of discomfort or the total refusal to engage with what the work is offering. There is a refusal to see, a refusal to hear. There is no desire to be aware of the taste, to smell one's way to information. No thank you. In this sense the encounter with art is no different from the meeting with another person or coming to terms with a new environment. Our intentions govern our senses.

What Do I Think I Know? What Do I Think I Understand?

I live my reality every day. I experience, I see and I listen to what goes on around me. A multiplicity of information jostles in my experience of this reality. I interpret it on the basis of what I have been through before and draw conclusions, which are sometimes revised even before they have been formulated. We are all born with the capacity to live our lives as creative beings, capable of thinking and feeling. The thin shell of the body encompasses an inexhaustible energy and a vast range of possibilities. We have to create ourselves as the people we want to be. But searching to fulfil one's capacities requires an exercise of will. Being a participant has its price and nothing is as pacifying as pleasure. The person who experiences pleasure and harmony often lacks the will to change which is the foundation of creative thinking. I think I know because I am reminded of something. I think I understand because something is recognised.

And suddenly the familiar codes no longer apply. I have never been here before. I have never previously experienced ice, radiant nights and cold such as this. I am astonished

by what I experience in physical terms and by the movement it gives birth to. And then I recognise something. This huddling, this attempt to keep the body together. This is something I do, not only to keep the cold at bay. I also do it to protect myself in certain emotional states. From internal coldness and dark. This is somewhere I have been before.

But when do I know?

Travelling

There is rumbling, thundering, crashing and shaking. And at entirely unpredictable intervals, swaying, scratching and sudden silences. Watching the breaking of the ice from the bridge is a purely physical adventure. An experience of power, gravity and absolute relentlessness. Being part of it from your bunk, exhausted and desperate for sleep, means holding on for dear life, swearing and cursing and drifting off to a sleep that is constantly interrupted. Tracking it from my workplace in the gym is a challenge of a different kind. During the course of the journey I have developed entirely new exercises in dance technique in a horizontal position. I look out.

The colour of the ice is white. The whitest imaginable. Everything is so white it is blinding. Dazzling. The colours of the sky, of the light, are reflected in the whiteness. And in the midst of all this - clear radiant blueness. Blue ice. A bright, clear blue of a shade I will never forget. Under the surface the ice is the colour of turquoise, but the blue that shines so prominently amidst the whiteness is stronger than any other blue I have ever seen. The scientists say it is a result of sunlight fracturing against cavities in the ice. I look out into all this. And then if I close my eyes, I see an entirely different set of colours in the darkness behind my eyelids. Warm, wonderful, muted colours against blackness. Inside and Outside complement each other. I am on the move between here and there: travelling.

Ruthlessly

What is timeless is also eternal. Most of what I encounter and feel is transient. Time as a concept exists by our mutual agreement, yet I stick to my own which is extremely subjective. Occasionally it is fleeting and elusive, at other times sluggish. Usually it is measured against huge quantities of transient things. The apple that decays from within, ice-cream melting, the numbered days of the elderly person. Here, on the ice, time is measured against what appears to be timeless.

It is easy to experience this landscape as eternal. This feeling changes me, it soothes my anxiety. Time becomes what is contained within. The chronology gets lost. Hours and minutes are not counted. Time is - and I have to conform to it. If I want I can lie down in the snow and simply stop.

Lightning fast, slowly – I practice patience. The work is lonely. The starvation of the body that affects one on one's own is ruthless and cruel. It can be alleviated by sensuous contact that is heartfelt and intimate. It can also be mitigated by the sensuous experience of skin meeting snow. When the body is received by loose snow and beds softly down to rest in shelter from the wind and in apparent safety. It is easy to remain lying there.

To dance on the ice is to experience these extremes in movement. Large, powerful movements in opposition to all that is quiet, tight, hard, tiny movements in toward the body – or absolute stillness. Extremes of enormous exertion or total rest. I sing out loud against the biting wind that erases my voice as soon as it has left my body. I sing aloud, bellowing against the wind or whispering into the quietness. No one can hear me. I am dancing.

Perhaps it is these extremes and oppositions that create the experience of the absolute beauty the ice landscape possesses. All this loveliness, this incredible beauty set against terrible harshness, severity, frozenness and inhospitableness. No, the Arctic is not like anywhere else.

Afterwards

And so our Arctic expedition comes to an end, 6 different research projects were carried out: the role of the East Greenland current in the global circulation of the oceans. How a decrease in the ozone layer threatens marine life. Micro-organisms and the carbon cycle. The effects of the sea on organic compounds. Radioactive elements as remedies. The common occurrence of environmental pollutants in the Arctic, and my own project: The Art of Dance in the Arctic – an exploration of movement in a frozen landscape.

We sailed a total of 6860 nautical miles. The ship's engine consumed 1900 cubic metres of heavy oil. We travelled over water that ranged in depth from 47 to 4000 metres! The thickest ice we encountered was 4-5 metres. The most severe chill factor was minus 47° (temperature plus wind) and when the wind was at its strongest, the gusts reached 30 metres per second.

The sound of the wind, the taste of the cold, images of the light... The memory of all that is powerful – it is all stored inside me. So much struggle and pleasure have changed me, as experience always changes you. Now all this will become the source for my ongoing work with dance. Can the experience be given shape, be translated into choreographic form? What will happen to all these intentions in the encounter with the dancers? The desire to see where it goes is very powerful. I close my eyes and see the images appear inside in the darkness. My pulse accelerates at the idea. The challenge is enticing. I want to make use of myself. I want to work. Seven months. In seven months this will be presented to an audience in *The Outmost White*. Will it be enjoyable?