

# Jérôme Bel and Myself: Gender and Intercultural Collaboration

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SUSAN LEIGH FOSTER

*In what follows, I stage a three-way conversation between French choreographer Jérôme Bel, myself as a feminist scholar writing about a piece he created in collaboration with Thai dancer Pichet Klunchun entitled Pichet Klunchun and Myself (2004), and myself watching the performance of the lecture along with Bel.*

*When I performed this imaginary conversation with Bel at the Dance Congress in Hamburg 2009, the two versions of myself shared one microphone at a podium and I impersonated 'Bel' speaking from a different microphone at the same podium, with each 'person' articulating a different style and tone. At that presentation, Bel was in the audience, and we began a dialogue afterwards that is ongoing, and for that reason, I chose to retain the conversation format used in the conference for this published version of the text. Since the conference presentation, I have viewed a subsequent collaboration that Bel undertook with Klunchun, About Khon (2009), in which he takes on a role very different from the one in Pichet Klunchun and Myself. The conversation that follows gestures towards the ongoingness of both his artistic research and my scholarly inquiry and to the ways in which artists and scholars might enter into dialogues of great mutual benefit.*

*Like Bel, I believe that both choreographers and dance scholars engage in research. They propose hypotheses about the nature of corporeality and the construction of identities, both individual and social, and they investigate the ramifications and consequences of their various propositions. Whether this research issues on the concert stage or the printed page, it offers different and equally valid ways of knowing. Therefore, I have attempted to adapt the format of Pichet Klunchun and Myself in this essay, 'choreographing' the writing so as to affirm*

*the importance of performance as a form of knowledge production and, at the same time, de-stabilizing scholarship so that it is not construed as 'having the last word'.*

About a half hour into his conversation with Pichet Klunchun about his career as a dancer, Jérôme Bel asks Klunchun to teach him some dance. Declining to learn the role of the demon, because he is not in good shape, Bel requests, instead, to be instructed in a phrase from the female repertoire, one of the three other principle character types in Khon, classical Thai dance. Klunchun then takes him through a phrase, explaining in detail the positions and actions of legs, torso, arms, hands, fingers, and head. Although designed to illustrate the complexities of the form, this pedagogical moment also demonstrates Bel's ability to pick up the movement and execute, at least superficially, a relatively accurate, for the untrained body, version of the phrase. It also secures the notion of gender as performance as these two renowned male artists pursue a seemingly spontaneous cross-cultural conversation about their work.

JÉRÔME: You read that one sentence quite well – it had a lot of commas and halts and awkward turns, but you managed it. Were you trying to choreograph the sentence so as to suggest the way that a dancer learns movement?

MYSELF: Yes, it's very nice that you noticed.

Touring for the past five years internationally and to adulatory reviews and standing ovations across Europe and North America and to more mixed reviews in Korea, Singapore, and Indonesia, *Pichet Klunchun and Myself* stages a dialogue between two artists, who ask each other questions and demonstrate their work to one another as a way of finding out about each other's worlds of dance.<sup>1</sup>

JÉRÔME: This seems like a congenial gathering of people. Does it make you nervous, standing up in front of them and delivering a lecture?

MYSELF: Always.

In what follows, I want to examine *Pichet Klunchun and Myself* in relation to its representation of gender and, even more, the gendered division of labor that it embodies in order to discern what I see as serious obstacles to intercultural col-

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1 *Pichet Klunchun and Myself* had its premiere at the Patravadi Theatre's Studio 1 as part of the Bangkok Fringe Festival. Singaporean producer Tang Fu Kuen initiated by collaboration pairing the two artists who were unfamiliar with each other's work.

laboration. I use gender as an analytic framework for categorizing action throughout the performance in order to reveal the underpinnings of the euphoria produced by this display of cross-cultural conversation and understanding. *Pichet Klunchun and Myself* performs the felicitous heterosexual marriage of two cultures whose histories of privilege, wealth, and access to global circulation of products and ideas have been markedly different. It also reaffirms and reinvigorates hierarchies of civilization implemented in Europe's colonization of the world. Although the association between the feminine and the Other and the ways in which the two are used to mutually marginalize one another have been demonstrated innumerable times, I still find it illuminating to move across this territory, yet again, especially in the context of the recent explosion of intercultural collaborations in the arts.

JÉRÔME: And you have to stand very still and look very serious while you read?

The feminine is referenced in this performance seven times: 1) as Klunchun's description of his mother who wanted a son, the more desirable gender, especially after having had three daughters; 2) as one of four types in the classical Thai repertoire of characters; 3) as a character demonstrated by Klunchun who has just been told about the death of her husband; 4) as a form that it would be easier for Bel to learn than the demon form; 5) as the child bearing, non-married partner of Bel and as the vehicle for a family desired by Klunchun, but who does not want to marry, a prerequisite for having children in Thai culture; 6) as the transgendered character of Bel lip-synching Roberta Flack's performance of the song *Killing Me Softly with His Song* in order to demonstrate death onstage;<sup>2</sup> and 7) as the nearly naked dancers performing in a sex bar in Bangkok.

In addition to these appearances of the feminine on stage and in the dialogue, I am also interested in the performance of the feminine that occurs throughout the piece in the form of a set of dichotomies that align systematically with the masculine-feminine dyad. In this dyad the feminine is fleshed out through its association with tradition, unquestioning allegiance to larger social order, the non-technological, the desire to explain and be understood; the contorted and unnatural cultivation of the body; and as the object caught within representation. In contrast, the masculine is embodied as experimental and contemporary; as al-

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2 *Killing Me Softly with His Song* was composed by Charles Fox and Norman Gimbel in 1971. Roberta Flack recorded it in 1973, and her version won Grammy Awards for Song of the Year, Record of the Year, and Best Pop Vocal Performance by a Female Performer.

ways questioning, conducting research, presenting the latest reality; as hi-tech; as privileged to initiate questioning and to evaluate answers; as eschewing all refinement, exaggeration, or premeditated self-presentation; and as dwelling outside of representation.

JÉRÔME: That's a very impressive set of claims. I can see why you want to be very quiet in your body.

The performance begins with Klunchun and Bel entering the stage and seating themselves on two chairs facing one another. Barefoot, and dressed in loose, cropped pants and T-shirt, Klunchun carries a bottle of water. Bel, in jeans, boots, and shirt, glances briefly down at the laptop on the floor beside his chair, before beginning a set of questions to Klunchun. The 90-100 minute performance consists entirely in a mutual interview, conducted informally, first by Bel and then, in the second half, by Klunchun. The conversation proceeds methodically from personal background to training, to opportunities to perform and make a living as an artist, and the parameters for how various subjects might be represented in dance. Each artist, familiar with the answers he will deliver, nonetheless proceeds in a seemingly spontaneous manner, creating a dialogue that is more organized than a typical conversation, yet unpretentiously straightforward and dedicated to the task of finding out about the other.

JÉRÔME: But I have to say that it strikes me as very odd, this custom of standing up in front of people and reading a piece of paper. Do people ever extemporize their lectures?

MYSELF: Yes, some professors are very accomplished at that, especially here in Europe. I find it most impressive, the way they form such perfect sentences spontaneously. But I'm no good at it, and I only have twenty more minutes.

JÉRÔME: Well then, I suppose you should continue, if you want to make all those points.

We learn that Klunchun became a dancer to give thanks to a deity associated with dance after his mother had prayed to it to become pregnant with a boy. Expert in the demon repertoire, Klunchun explains that nowadays he typically performs excerpts of the classical court danced narratives for tourists who book dinner and Thai dance for a given evening. A recent Prime Minister dedicated to modernizing the country, abandoned the classical arts in favor of cha-cha and tango. Klunchun, however, remains dedicated to the project of revitalizing this classical repertoire and demonstrating its value to Thai culture.

At Bel's request, Klunchun demonstrates various aspects of Khon – basic training exercises, character types, and ways of representing death onstage. Differing positions of arm or hands designating different characters are seen by Bel as almost imperceptible, however, Klunchun assures him they are enormously distinct. Scenes of violence and destruction remain opaque to Bel until Klunchun describes the action while dancing it. Once he is initiated into the symbolic system, Bel is better able to follow along, sometimes correctly guessing the meaning of Klunchun's actions. Still, Klunchun must explain to a disbelieving Bel the refusal of the form to represent death onstage. Bel also queries the strenuous, even grotesque, demands placed on the hand when he attempts to reproduce Klunchun's intense curvature of wrist and fingers. Klunchun responds matter-of-factly that the dancer's training constructs analogies between the body and temple architecture. The curves of the hand serve to re-channel the energy back towards the center of the body, so that the dancing establishes a continuous recycling of effort. Klunchun contrasts this aesthetic with the Western propensity to throw energy away in various leaps and extensions of body parts.

Here, for the first time in his interrogation, Bel expresses admiration: "I'm very impressed; this is something I had never thought of before." Up until that moment, Bel alternates most often between silence and skepticism, confusion, dis-belief, and perplexity in response to Klunchun's answers and demonstrations. Requesting to be shown a violent scene, for example, Bel initially rejects Klunchun's performance as insufficiently violent until Klunchun decodes it for him. Responding to the idea that death could be signified by a long and exceptionally slow walk across the entire stage, Bel is at a loss to imagine how meaning can be conveyed within the form. Even the "Good luck" that Bel offers in response to Klunchun's expressed desire to vivify Khon for a younger generation belies his uncomprehending incredulity.

JÉRÔME: Do you think you change people's minds when you give a lecture?

MYSELF: Do you when you present a dance performance?

JÉRÔME: Maybe I just give them something to think about.

MYSELF: And some parameters for thinking about it?

JÉRÔME: I suppose so.

Bel then invites Klunchun to question him, and we learn that Bel, although unmarried, has a child. Expressing a desire for children, Klunchun rejects Bel's proposal to bear one out of wedlock. Bel's raised eyebrow and shrug of the shoulders renders Klunchun's response prudish and old fashioned. Asked to demonstrate some dancing, Bel replies with beguiling modesty that he is not a

‘real’ choreographer, nor does he perform. After Klunchun objects that he has shown Bel a great deal, Bel offers one of his favorite scenes: he stands unassumingly gazing out at the audience with interest but no affect. Deploring the society of spectacle in which we are living, Bel explains that such an action is “not a representation”. In a second demonstration, Bel uses his computer to play a soundtrack from David Bowie’s *Let’s Dance* to which he moves with a marked absence of energy, commitment, or fervency, thereby exposing the traditional association of rock music with abandoned physical display.<sup>3</sup>

MYSELF: How are you finding the lecture thus far?

JÉRÔME: You’re making some interesting points, but there’s someone who’s almost asleep over there, and I can see why – listening to this complicated prose has a kind of numbing effect. And there are no pictures or video excerpts ... seems a little dull.

When Klunchun expresses disappointment at Bel’s performance, Bel retorts that he is not surprised. Advocating for his anti-virtuosity approach, Bel aspires to create more egalitarian relationships using pop music, a form that belongs to everybody. Bel continues by explaining that whereas Klunchun dances about and for a King, Bel’s country beheaded theirs two hundred years earlier so as to live in a more egalitarian society. Sponsored by that government, Bel conducts research within the ‘contemporary arts’, producing new works, whose form and content are unforeseen, and whose reception is frequently mixed at best. Nonetheless Bel aspires to make space for viewers to have their own response to life’s enduring challenges. He illustrates this invitation by performing a very slow slump to the floor while singing along with *Killing Me Softly with His Song*, and then remaining inert for the last verse. Klunchun admits to having been moved by this action since it reminded him of his paralyzed mother’s death, and Bel is pleased that his aversion to virtuosity and the quiet and matter-of-fact display of the body lying onstage as the symbol of death has been successful. Having agreed that they are very good viewers, even ideal, of one another’s work, Bel reminds Klunchun that he cannot tell him anything. It must be discovered.

In one final example of his choreography, Bel begins to demonstrate a dance based on the manipulation of pieces of his own flesh. But when he moves from his ample stomach to take down his pants, Klunchun refuses to view anything further, claiming his culture’s standards of aesthetic decency. Bel responds that

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3 *Let’s Dance* was the title track on David Bowie’s hit album *Let’s Dance* which issued in 1983.

he has seen considerable nakedness in Bangkok in the bars, but Klunchun explains that these dancers are working for tourist dollars. At this point, Klunchun and Bel agree to end their conversation.

JÉRÔME: It also seems to me that the whole set-up with the podium and the microphone is rather, if you don't mind the expression, phallic.

MYSELF: What would you do instead?

JÉRÔME: Well, I'm not sure, this is your gig, and I don't usually perform in this kind of situation. Maybe you should have a microphone that no one ever speaks from. Or you could circulate through the space rather than standing in one place ... Or so something with the paper you're reading from ... I'd have to think about it.

MYSELF: Well, do. I'd like to know how we might make it different.

All of the appearances of women in the piece cast them in highly traditional roles – as mothers, as members of the social whose roles are well established and who take responsibility for grieving for the loss of others, as sex workers, and as roles inhabitable by men when the need arises. And each role locates women in an inferior relationship to men. As mothers their labor is erased, for it is Bel who 'has' a child, and Klunchun who became the dancer. As sex workers, they are betraying their country's standards of decency. As theatrical roles, they demand less physically than other character types, or else they serve as vessels easily occupied by the male artists to demonstrate their form's aesthetic proclivities. The fact that these two male artists find so much in common in these archetypal feminine images permits them to establish a tacit familiarity and a tenuous equality to one another. The ease with which they reference the feminine and move in and out of her roles confirms their privilege and superiority.

At the same time, the masculine-feminine binaries operating in the guise of oppositions such as tradition/experimentation and representation/beyond representation work to place Klunchun in a distinctly inferior position. Klunchun's unquestioning acceptance and pursuit of dancing as a life calling, his devotion to resuscitating an outmoded form, the rigidity of the form itself with its detailed specifications for roles, stories, and modes of representation – all seem quaint and naïve at best when compared with Bel's iconoclastic vision. Klunchun's pliability, both in terms of how he has worked to cultivate the body, and also his amenability to explaining and demonstrating his form, signal a willingness to connect to Bel and to the world that Bel's aesthetics, in their guise as pioneering research, disdain. Where Klunchun has dedicated much of his life to the acquisition of technical facility at dancing, Bel has devoted a comparable amount of

time to learning and then unlearning how to dance. Where Klunchun can efficiently decode the meanings behind each gesture and phrase in his danced dramas, Bel aspires to create space for the ordinary and the everyday as actions that cannot be decoded because they simply are what they are. Staring straightforwardly at the audience, lying quietly on the stage, Bel claims to eclipse representation by presenting things that cannot mean anything else. Yet even these claims are vivified and fortified by the prior revelations of Klunchun regarding how dance signifies.

JÉRÔME: Then why didn't you let me begin this presentation?

MYSELF: Because I believe that even if you gave an anti-lecture first or even without my lecture, you'd still be operating within representation and, here, within the frame of an academic lecture.

Bel stakes his claim to choreographic originality by implementing a distinction between that which is caught within representation and that which resides outside of it. Claiming a naturalness equivalent to that of the early modern dancers a century ago, Bel obfuscates his heroic aesthetic quest through beguiling ineptness and a willing confession of his lack of competence at dancing and his marginal status as a choreographer. In so doing, he secures a prestigious position for himself on the vanguard of the avant-garde. From this position Bel serves, not a monarchy, but rather the 'people'.

JÉRÔME: They don't have to come to my performances anymore than they have to listen to this lecture.

Bel's location beyond representation, however, depends upon the prior establishment of the mutual interview as the format in which intercultural collaboration will be displayed. The dialogue-as-performance recapitulates Bel's dedication to arranging the 'spontaneous' onstage. The two artists have not met, exchanged ideas, and then developed something for presentation. Instead, they represent onstage their initial encounters and explorations with the same quality of unpretentious straightforwardness that Bel invokes when staring at the audience or lying on the floor as if 'dead'. Bel has thereby established the representational grounds on which their exchange will take place and then located himself outside that framework as an artist who eschews representation. In so doing, Bel uses the comparison of his own approach with that of Klunchun in order to expose, most humorously, the intentions of his artistic practice in relation to the general workings of contemporary concert dance. However, he also creates for

himself a special place of privilege beyond the roles of masculine and feminine from which to display the brilliance of his artistic vision.

JÉRÔME: Well, isn't that what you're doing to me?

MYSELF: It's true, I invited you to this lecture. But I'm trying to find a space where we can have a discussion that does not advantage one of us at the expense of the other.

Throughout the performance, even as he is positioned within this representation-al system, Klunchun preserves his dignity, integrity, and worldview. He quietly rebuts Bel's dismissal of the different positions of the arm for different characters by asserting their dramatic effectiveness. He likewise rejects Western dance as a practice that throws energy away. And he steadfastly maintains his modesty in the face of invitations to produce a child out of wedlock and to view Bel's naked body. Although located within the apparatus of representation, he nonetheless perseveres in the commitment to his art and his willingness to share it with anyone who expresses interest. He even challenges Bel's theory of representation by continuing to decode, in the same way as he has his own work, Bel's performance of death.

According to Klunchun's aesthetics, the dialogue with Bel places him at no disadvantage nor does it demean his art form or way of life. He never attempts to ingratiate himself or his dance with either Bel or the audience. He presents the facts of his life and dance form with care and confidence. Similarly, for Bel's aesthetics, given the limited amount of time allotted for the two artists to get to know one another, the most honest plan, one preserving the integrity of each practice, would be to present a simulated version of their initial encounter on-stage. Yet the collision of these two worldviews and their assimilation into Bel's conception of representation reinvigorate the first-world's heritage of privilege based in colonial histories and the stereotypes that enabled colonization.

JÉRÔME: But if we're always operating within the realm of representation, there isn't any place for hope, any imaginary where we could get away to a different world.

MYSELF: There's always irony.

JÉRÔME: You mean, reflecting and commenting on things while you're doing them?

