

Chapter Four

The body speaks¹

The individual body should be seen as the most immediate, the proximate terrain where social truths are played out, as well as a locus of personal and social resistance, creativity and struggle.

(Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987: 31)

what exactly do I want to say with this big body and all these stories inside my head?
(Choreographer Ntombi Gasa²)

How does one read the meaning of dance? How does dance communicate? The previous chapter demonstrated how the levels of meaning in a dance work are formed in the creative process, the performance of the work, and the relationship between these. In Maqoma's *Virtually Blond* the thread that binds these elements are the individual stories of the dancers and how they communicate these to a wider audience. In the choreographic process Maqoma challenged the dancers to deal with the question of visibility by making the personal public through movements that he gave to them and through their own gestures. It was his intention that their private stories would represent broader social wounds through the way that they were told on stage. The 'text' of this work was interpreted in a number of ways, not all in support of Maqoma's original aim. This raised questions about the problems of interpretation and where the meaning of an artwork lies.

This chapter argues that the body is where the primary process of signification occurs, particularly in dance. This idea was introduced briefly in the previous chapter with reference to Hanna's (1983: 8) emphasis of the importance of emotional responses to the moving body for communication that transforms society. The moving body has meaning

¹ The idea of the speaking body is the basic premise in approaches to contemporary choreography. For example, see Blom and Chaplin (1989)

² In proceedings of the 7th Jomba! Contemporary Dance Conference, *African Contemporary dance? Questioning issues of a performance aesthetic for a developing and ndependent continent* (2004: 48)

that is related to but is also independent of a choreographer's initial intention. There are strong parallels here between language and movement. Bakhtin's (in Eagleton 1983: 122) description of language as a matter of social practice is also relevant to dance. But dance is also more than a 'text'. Although Mallarmé described dance as "a poem detached from all verbal means", as "bodily writing" (1959: 304), this focus on language and writing reduces the communicative potential of the body. It is through the body that dance creates identities that have social meaning. This occurs through a process of signification.

Maqoma's work illustrates the social significance of dance because of his use of the body. He raises questions about how the body speaks and its relationship to society. This chapter examines these questions in two sections. Firstly, it focuses on the process of signification and how this occurs through the body using Kristeva's (1984) notion of the "semiotic order" and Eco's (1977, 1984) ideas about the sign. Secondly, it explores the relationship between the body and society. It does so by introducing the importance of context through a brief discussion of Eagleton's (1983) view of the potential of art and Douglas's (1973) study of the body as a social symbol. The key thread of this discussion is the way in which the body is used to make statements about society. With this in mind, Foucault's (1977, 1980) approach to power, and Stallybrass and White's (1986) ideas about transgression inform the last section of the chapter. What this discussion addresses is the disruptive potential of the dancing body through the example of Maqoma's questions about gender, sexuality and race.

Signification and the body

Dance communicates primarily through the moving body. It is its expressive medium. As Lecoq, Carasso and Lallias (2002: 15) explain in relation to the development of their teaching approach at the International Theatre School, "movement, as manifested in the human body, is our permanent guide in this journey from life to theatre". It is the choreographer's role to find ways to move and shape the instrument of the body (Blom and Chaplin 1989: 16). In doing so, the choreographer and the dancers are saying something through the body in a process of communication and signification.

For Eco (1976: 8), communication is “the passage of...information” and signification is when something “*stands* for something else”, but which does not operate simply on a level of substitution or equivalence. These processes cannot be easily separated. Dance, through the medium of the body, is both the transmitter of the message and the message about something meaningful. The sign is therefore not only linguistic, but is also somatic. Eco (ibid: 16) includes in his definition of a sign, “*everything* that, on the grounds of a previously established social convention, can be taken as *something standing for something else*”. In dance, then, the body signifies and communicates meaning through movement.

This is reinforced by Williams (in Zelinger 1989: 11), who states that:

a sign such as a dance gesture is a mark of an intention (conscious or unconscious) to communicate a meaning.

However, in early semiotic studies of dance, and dance notation (cf Laban 1966), there is an intense focus on the biological – the action of body parts in time and space, and little emphasis on meaning. Notation strips a dance-work of its meaning. It assumes that the actual bodies performing the movements are exchangeable, there is no significance to the individual, only to the physical movement (cf Goodman 1976). What will be illustrated as this discussion develops is the importance of personal style in contemporary dance as opposed to forms that have much stricter parameters. Even though there are variations within forms³, as illustrated above - in classical ballet, for example - the emphasis is on how well a performer meets a model. However much an individual dancer makes a role their own, they are working within much narrower boundaries. In contemporary dance, the focus is on constant innovation.

The body as a sign, particularly in the context of the contemporary dance genre, therefore holds within it the potential to say many things at the same time. It is this polyvalency that allows for a dance work to have many meanings (as illustrated in the previous chapter). What this discussion also demonstrates is the instability of the sign – its

³ For example, Balanchine’s (cf. Garis 1995) innovations in ballet

meaning is not fixed. The result of this is that it has the potential to be disruptive. The dancing body has an incredible power to “disrupt or transgress the dominant social order” (Thomas 2003: 173). In *Virtually Blond*, Maqoma’s use of inversion and the dancers’ individual gestures are challenging to the norms of the society they are speaking about. Although *Virtually Blond* was possibly less disruptive than Maqoma may have liked, it did unsettle its audience on certain levels.

The power of the moving body to disrupt in this way will be elaborated later. For now it will be explained using Kristeva’s notion of the “semiotic order”. Kristeva resisted the blanket terms of systems theories of language. As Moi (1986: 10) states, she saw language as simultaneously “subject to and subversive of the rule of Law”. Kristeva explains the “signifying process” as the interaction of two “modalities” (Thomas 2003: 168-169). She does so in order to examine the way in which language creates meaning (ibid: 168), and also to uncover what cannot be signified, what “resists intelligibility” (Moi 1986: 90). What is relevant here is the relationship between the “semiotic order” and the “symbolic order” (in Thomas 2003: 168).

For Kristeva, the “symbolic” and “semiotic” orders are contrasted as follows: the symbolic is the official rules of language, or the “law of the father” from Lacan; while the semiotic is pre-linguistic (Thomas 2003: 168). The semiotic and the symbolic are “processes, not static entities” (Moi 1986: 12). It is in the semiotic that the body is centred because this order is “comprised of bodily drives and ‘pulsions’” (idem). This space, or more specifically “chora” (from Plato meaning receptacle, unstable, becoming), is pre-symbolic and is described by Kristeva (1984: 25) as “an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral states” (Thomas 2003: 169). In other words, her main argument is that the body signifies before it even speaks.

The semiotic lives in the unconscious and is forever threatening to break through to the symbolic order (idem). At this point it then resides within the symbolic and can only be understood as a *theoretical supposition* (Kristeva 1984: 68). As an assumed space,

however, it has a kind of power. According to Thomas (2003: 169), Kristeva has theorised a “space of endless possibilities, which cannot be contained by the rational structure of language” and it is from this space “that there is the potential to disrupt, challenge, break out of or de-stabilise the dominant symbolic order”. What is also significant about this space is that it is the receptacle of the body, its movements and its unconscious expressions. Based on this signifying process, Kristeva defines a subject that is not fixed or stable, but is itself in process (idem).

The dancing body is therefore a sign, but it is also more than a sign - it is an agent of communication, expression and social relationships. As Cowan (1990: 24) explains, dancing bodies are not only as “signs” to be “read”, but must also be seen as “a process of intersubjectivity”. She illustrates this view using the example of dance in Northern Greece where “the stereotypical, and often self-consciously and playfully exaggerated, postures of power, submission, and pleasure that celebrants assume in dance-events are evidence of this kind of reflexivity” (idem). What is important here is the idea that movement carries its own meaning because the body is its primary instrument. As Lecoq illustrates in his training of actors at the International Theatre School, the root of which is physical movement such as running, walking, sitting, throwing, pulling and pushing. His premise is that physical actions “lay down circuits in the human body, through which emotions flow” (Lecoq, Carasso and Lallias 2002: 70-71).

A semiotic approach to dance therefore draws on the idea of semiosis – the process of signification. Dance is more than a closed system; it is about how the body communicates meaning. There is a close relationship between language and identity, and identity and the body. When discussing the dancing body in terms of signification, the link is that a system is about potential, not fixed meaning. Language and the body - which are both systems of signification - are not based on mere equivalence. Their meaning is not fixed. That is what gives a dance work its resonance. Zelinger (1979: 9) states that a semiotics of dance must address the ways in which dance signifies, how the body is used in the process of signification, and how dance is ‘read’ by a spectator. In an analysis of this process, the production and the performance, the perception and the reception of dance in

culture are important (idem). The act of watching dance, for instance, is also rooted in and interpreted through the body. The audience and the performer are relating through their own embodied experiences of that moment. Acocella (2001: 13) describes this as a physical energy flow. She argues that the tools that the choreographer uses correspond to biochemical processes in our bodies when we watch dance (ibid: 14). As she states,

the truths of dance are not on the other side. They are in the bones of the dance, which our bones know how to read, if we let them (ibid: 15)⁴

This brings back the discussion in the previous chapter that meaning is not only about an artist's intention or the artwork itself, but implicates the audience too. The underlying idea is that how a story is told and interpreted has more significance than its plot (cf Barthes 1976). It also raises the problem of interpretation. There may be many layers of communication in a dance work. For Preston-Dunlop (1998: 27-35), for example, there are six: 1) referential: a movement refers to something in the cultural context, 2) aesthetic: in the spectator's attitude, ascribing value to the experience of a dance, 3) metalinguistic: commenting upon the rules of language used, 4) phatic: setting up the interaction/exchange and its character, 5) injunctive: focus on getting a response from the spectator, 6) performative: communication by the performer. There may also be a range of questions that can be asked in order to understand these elements. For example, "is the facial expressivity critical to the dance's power to communicate, or is the face intentionally masked?" (Dils and Albright 2001: 93), "which parts of the dancers' bodies are specifically articulated?" (ibid: 94), and "is a sense of rhythmic unity important, or are spatial formations a stronger priority?" (idem). However, the role of the audience in reading a work is a crucial aspect here. While the focus on the parts of the body as they 'speak' is relevant, this does not address the real issues of signification.

One of these issues is the question of an artist's intention. The previous chapter examined the relationship between the performance of *Virtually Blond* and the audience's interpretation. It argued that the work did not necessarily achieve Maqoma's aim. It

⁴ Bull's (1997) study on the relationship between the kinaesthetic and audience responses elaborated this discussion. This also points to the importance of the anthropologist as embodied subjects in their own studies (cf. Stoller 1989 and Grimshaw in Westermann 2005: 200)

revealed the problems with interpretation and where a meaning of an artwork lies. One role of an audience is to call an artist to account. This means that an audience is responsible for making judgements about what they watch and experience. In the following chapter the problems with this in South Africa are discussed more fully. For now what is relevant is the idea that what someone is saying depends on how articulate they are. By the same token, how people interpret depends on how 'literate' they are⁵ and whether or not they have the courage and honesty to speak up. In the case of Maqoma's work, most of those in the audience operate from within the same system as him (they are part of his personal and professional network). In other words, the audience that is reading his work often lacks the critical edge that comes from being outside of the system. A work of art is more than whether or not it fulfills a model. A work may be intended as radical, but the audience may not necessarily be able to cope with that. In this sense then, intention becomes slippery.

What this shows is that a process of signification is about an expressive medium but, more than that, it is about the way that it communicates and is read. A work can go beyond a choreographer's intention because this process is not fixed. This further explains Kristeva's (in Thomas 2003: 169) idea of the "space of endless possibilities" that is outside of the "rational structure of language". This is the space where the body as a tool of expression resides. In Maqoma's work, the body becomes the communicative instrument through which particular gestures speak to broader social issues. Movements, set, music and costume are the 'words' through which the 'text' of the dance is written. This supports the idea that a dance work has signs to be 'read'. At the same time it is nonverbal. As stated above, the linguistic analogy may be a valuable way of analysing the meaning of specific movements, however, dance is more than a 'text' to be 'read'⁶. Embodiment is central to an understanding of signification, and the body as an agent of communication is polyvalent.

⁵ It is not a prerequisite for an individual to have an education in the art form they are observing – anyone can have a response to art, which can be culturally informed (cf. studies on television viewership, for example, Ang 1993 and Michaels 2002). However, knowledge about a particular genre, and education in being able to read an artwork does affect the kinds and levels of interpretations that are possible

⁶ There is a large body of literature on nonverbal communication, of which dance is a part (cf Hall 1959, Polhemus 1975), but like studies on dance notation, this work often strips the body of its potential as an agent of meaning

Virtually Blond bodies

The discussion so far has focused on the body as a process of signification. This is elaborated here by explaining how that works in application to Maqoma's *Virtually Blond*. Building on Eco's idea of surplus and resonance, the body does more than stand for something else. A sign, as in Eco's (1984: 17) view is not simply a substitute. As explained above, it is encoded in a process of meaning that is open to interpretation. It is, therefore, unstable and unfixed. This is clear in the examples of the dancers' gestures and movements in *Virtually Blond*. The way that their use of their bodies can be understood is part of the broader potential of art in its openness to multiple interpretations (cf. Eco 1984: 24-25). Their gestures have meaning beyond the limits of the codes of language. They are part of the "semiotic order" delineated by Kristeva (Thomas 2003: 168).

Maqoma's approach in *Virtually Blond* was for each part of the body to:

have a space to be highlighted. In the past it was about the whole body, really lyrical. Now I'm looking at how the different parts of the body speak for themselves. Each part has a turn to take control of the body.⁷

Additionally, the focus was on the embodiment of emotions. As Maqoma explained in a rehearsal on 20 January 2004:

It's not about the beauty of the movement but the beauty of your emotions... Let your emotions drive your movements.

The initial discussions between Maqoma and the dancers were where ideas for their stories emerged. These were then articulated in the dancers' individual gestures and dance steps. The starting point was the step Maqoma choreographed, and which the dancers then in turn elaborated. There were also moments when the dancers found their own vocabularies. Using his choreography as a basis, each performer created a story of their own through particular gestures that had meaning for them. These gestures had meaning in relation to the overall context of the work. What is significant is that there are multiple ways of interpreting them. To distinguish for a moment: gesture is defined here

⁷ Personal communication, Johannesburg, 7 January 2004

as an independent motion with one part of the body that has meaning in the context of its use. This is much the same as Kundera's (1991: 3-4) description of an ageing woman who uses the wave of a young girl as a gesture that allows her to recapture her youth. It is an instant of movement that lives outside of time. Gesture in dance is a part of the movements that are created by steps put together into phrases.

Sidiya's most distinctive movement was the shaking of his body. He developed Maqoma's fluid, snake-like shaking into a more pronounced and desperate kind of movement. He also placed his hands in gestures that looked as if his wrists were broken. In one rehearsal, Maqoma instructed Sidiya not to

push too much... keep the sharpness. You want complete control – those turns and stop...I especially like the fingertips at your bum when you're shaking.⁸

Maqoma's initial explanation to Sidiya was about how to develop his movements:

You're creating that tension in the body, which is good, but let me see it in a way that is not fighting... Everything must happen from here (*holds his stomach*).⁹

Mahlangu's interpretation of Sidiya's movements was that he was "dealing with confusion – you don't know where or who you are – you're lost"¹⁰. Rapoo described that what he sees in Sidiya's movement of his hands above his head is "somebody being abused in a very harsh way... He's got all these blocks and wanted to hide his face"¹¹. Sidiya explained that he has

been driven by emotions...sometimes my movements will change. Sometimes they are so hard and heavy, at some stage they will be gentle when I think about what happened in the past.¹²

Rapoo also had a broken hand gesture, but his was more in the posture of a beggar. He also adapted Kau's original movements for his solo, performing the hip-swaying and clapping on the ground that she had brought in initially to represent her role as a woman. Ndimande (2004) believed that by these movements "he is reflecting to his culture, by

⁸ In rehearsal, Johannesburg, 16 August 2004

⁹ In rehearsal, Johannesburg, 16 January 2004

¹⁰ Personal communication, Johannesburg, 5 February 2004

¹¹ Personal communication, Johannesburg, 9 February 2004

¹² Personal communication, Johannesburg, 27 February 2004

talking or submitting to his ancestors”. It is seen as a sign of respect and politeness. Another aspect of his movement that relates to his cultural background is the dragging of his foot on the floor. Maqoma described this as a movement that reminds him of Thabo’s Tswana/Pedi background that looks similar to Khoisan dance¹³. In one rehearsal when Rapoo clutched his wrist, Maqoma shouted to him: “beg for help Thabo, beg for sympathy”¹⁴. Mahlangu explained the basis of the text that he wrote for Rapoo’s solo as the idea that

he is in a regretting situation – he did something to himself...you suffer the consequences, and at the same time you still have the strength to continue.¹⁵

Rapoo explained to me that he had always blamed himself for the abuse in his family. His holding of wrist signifies what he has missed in his life, and the burden he has carried.¹⁶ In his words:

it gets heavier and heavier and I’m struggling on my own to deal with these issues...All our stories are about a sense of anger in our past experiences.¹⁷

When Kau first introduced the hip-swaying and clapping on the ground after a discussion about what culture she belongs to, she provoked a strong response. Maqoma, for example, exclaimed:

I can’t watch that movement (*lying on the floor clapping*), it sends shivers down my spine.¹⁸

He later elaborated that it “says you are a victim of abuse”¹⁹.

¹³ Personal communication, Johannesburg, 17 August 2006

¹⁴ In rehearsal, Johannesburg, 4 February 2004

¹⁵ Personal communication, Johannesburg, 5 February 2004

¹⁶ Rapoo was the only dancer who shared the content of his story during the creative process

¹⁷ Personal communication, Johannesburg, 9 February 2004

¹⁸ In rehearsal, Johannesburg, 22 January 2004

¹⁹ Personal communication, Johannesburg, 17 August 2006



Thabo Rapoo, clapping on floor, *Virtually Blond* Dress Rehearsal, MIDM building, Johannesburg, August 2004

Mahlangu spoke about the theme of rape when he first watched Connie perform her solo:

when you do that movement you describe an action of being in a sexual situation and you see that element of power ion Connie...Rape should be an impossible thing, but it happens. In her text I talk about impossible things.²⁰

Kau explained that her story:

has developed into a woman who is strong, very traditional and respectful, and always get a sense of being abused. Very sexual and sensual, a bit vulnerable and a bit confused. It's different characters.²¹

The core element of Shili's expression was his anger. He included vibrant Zulu Ndlamu kicks and hitting the floor with his fists. These movements first emerged in a rehearsal on 8 January 2004 when he was trying to access some kind of emotion and became very angry. This was the day after the dancers had revealed their private stories to Maqoma. Ndimande (2004) explains Shili's role in the work as a protector of beliefs. Mahlangu interpreted Shili's role in the following way: "he is suffering from peer pressure and

²⁰ Personal communication, Johannesburg, 5 February 2004

²¹ Personal communication, Johannesburg, 9 February 2004

being judged and has to be strong and has the strength to stand”²². Shili explained that the heaviness in his movements represents “the hardness of things that I feel inside which are dragging me not to be free and express easily”²³.

Radebe did not really have time to develop her own gestures or vocabulary, but did assert herself as a central character through her interpretation of the steps that Maqoma choreographed. This was the first lead role that she had since she had joined MIDM. The key idea behind her solo was what it means to belong. For much of the work she fights to find her own space in relation to the other characters and ends as the only one standing tall. Maqoma instructed Radebe not to carry emotion in her face, but rather to focus on the movements of her body. Through this, he wanted her to ask, “what is it, am I here in the right space, who are these people?”²⁴.

Each dancer therefore found movements that had meaning for them – ways of telling their stories through their particular gestures. These movements are also a reference to something beyond the personal. Shili’s floor-punching, Sidiya’s shaking, Rapoo’s broken wrist gesture, Radebe’s direct gaze into the audience, and Kau’s hip-swaying and clapping, for example, hold in them both the individual meaning and the broader associations that are possible when viewed by an audience. Certain gestures and movements that the dancers in *Virtually Blond* used were challenging to wider social convention (illustrating Preston-Dunlop’s referential and injunctive elements to communication in dance). For example, Rapoo’s use of the female clapping, which signifies subservience, was a both a gender inversion and a challenge to certain norms of gender roles in ‘traditional’ African societies. Kau, Rapoo and Radebe’s hip-swaying was highly flirtatious and became a pre-cursor to the “seduction scene” that followed. The men holding their genitals provoked in the viewer a discomfort and questioning about what it means to be a man.

²² Personal communication, Johannesburg, 5 February 2004

²³ Personal communication, Johannesburg, 12 February 2004

²⁴ In post-run discussion, Johannesburg, 16 August 2004

This discussion has shown how the body works as a process of signification. It has marked out the ways in which gesture and movement speak. The body becomes a sign, but also an agent of communication in this process. What is also important is the idea that dance, in particular contemporary dance, is polyvalent. What is being said is open to many interpretations. Its meaning is not fixed. A dancer may perform a certain gesture that may have many layers of meaning depending on who is watching and how able or willing they are to read it. The following section expands on the role of the body in creating meaning by stretching the discussion beyond a particular speaking body. It argues for the importance of context by examining the broader relationship between the body and society.

The relationship between dance, the body and society

The surplus and resonance of a sign (here the moving body) depend on the connections between that body and its social context. Given that signs are always already full, it is no surprise to say that the body is not neutral, especially not the dancing body. This was illustrated early on by Evans-Pritchard (1928) in his study of the Azande *gbere buda* dance. Ness (1996: 250) describes his view of the dancing bodies “not simply (as) anatomical organisms” but “socially constructed” subjects “possessing characteristics of age, sex, and residential locality”. The body, however, is not only an object onto which social status is imprinted, but it also creates and communicates meaning, as discussed above. This view is in contrast to Kaeppler’s approach to the body, which assumes a universality, a body that exists in “abstract geometrical three-dimensional space, that can perform movement structures, functions, roles, and other such elements” (Ness 1996: 260). Meduri’s approach to the body, in contrast to Kaeppler, reveals an embodied subject – a body that has a personality and feels emotions (ibid: 263). What is examined here is the relationship between the body and society – the idea of the body as a social symbol.

Anthropology has been engaging with questions about the body, representation, signification and social boundaries at least since the 1970s²⁵. Douglas's (1970, 1973) contribution to understanding the relationship between the body and society is particularly significant because they have a dialectical relationship – one creates and recreates the other²⁶. It is therefore not revolutionary to suggest that the body says something about society, and that social relationships are enacted on and through the body. This idea has a particular potency in the case of dance, however, because it is the dancer's body that has the potential to make statements about what is otherwise difficult to say. The body is the dancer's medium. Because contemporary dance invites many interpretations, the field is wide open for the controversial and unsettling.

The body cannot be isolated from its cultural context in an analysis of the way in which it speaks to social issues. As Eagleton (1983: 114) explains in relation to the meaning of words, the “intention” of language cannot be separated from “practical conditions” and “significant context”. In dance, Hanna (1987) outlined one of the earlier cross-cultural models of communication that she designed as a flow chart with links between the elements of the network of communication surrounding the dance-object (ibid: 79). By including every possible communicative exchange or interpretation with any kind or number of social actor or performer, in a range of contexts across cultures, her model becomes so broad that its concept loses potency²⁷. However, she did lay the ground for the importance of culture to dance. An essential component of this, which she did not emphasise, is that the body is the instrument of communication in what she defines as the “medium channel” – the dance-object (Ness 1996: 253).

²⁵ One of the earliest texts on the relationship between the body and society is Mauss's (1935) *Techniques of the body*, in which he examines how the body is inscribed by society, and how the body adapts to or resists these techniques. This is the origin of Bourdieu's (1977) idea of 'habitus', which Cowan (1990: 23) describes as a “theory of embodiment”

²⁶ Following Hertz (1973) and Needham (1973) for example. Cf. also Blacking (1977)

²⁷ cf Ness (1996: 253-256) who outlines the central nodes of this model: 1) catalysts which determine the occasions of the dance – in other words the contextual elements of who, what, where, when, how, and why; 2) audiences; 3) dancers and choreographers – defined as the “encoding-decoding” nodes in the performance; and 4) the dance-object – defined as the “medium channel”

The key idea here is that art can be an act of provocation. It has the potential to challenge social norms and conventions (cf Eagleton 1983). Contemporary dance, in its nature, is transgressive. Through the body, choreographers and dancers make statements about society. What this raises is the centrality of power. The following discussion examines the way in which power is enacted on the body, and the way in which the body becomes a tool of transgression – a way of subverting, resisting and disrupting. It explores how the body is shaped in order to say particular things. This will be elaborated in the next chapter through the idea that what it is doing is speaking truth to power.

Power and the body

An essential component of the relationship between the body and society is the theme of power, particularly the ways in which the body is constrained, and how these constraints are resisted. This theme, too, has a long history in scholarly thought. Foucault's (1977) importance in this area is specifically in how he conceptualises the disciplining of the body.²⁸ His focus is on how power works in and defines modernity. He traces shifts in the exercise of power on the body from torture to surveillance. The key idea in this last phase is that of the docile body, which is created through forms of disciplinary power that Sawicki (1991: 67) describes as "a knowledge of and power over the individual body – its capacities, gestures, movements, location, and behaviours". In many ways, this is a replay of the structuralist idea that we are spoken – we are made. Our bodies therefore speak to and about the context that has produced them.

Dance is a creative space for enacting these power relationships and also representing a resistance to the constraints of everyday life. In this view, *Virtually Blond* is a statement about issues of freedom. It questions the extent to which our bodies are our own, and our stories remain private. Congolese choreographer Faustin Linyekula speaks about control over the body by Mobutu Seseseko in terms of the clothing that people were allowed to wear. At the same time choreographers could use the body to create work that speaks against these restrictions.

²⁸ cf. also Rabinow (1986)

In Linyekula's words,

So, the body remains, like the last shield for freedom ... Even though with that body we had more freedom to die from disease or hunger, but at least we have that little space and to create with one body that little space for a dream.²⁹

In the space of dance, the body is given a kind of freedom that it does not have in everyday life. It simultaneously breaks out of the confines of everyday norms and expected behaviours, and comments on the restrictions that they create. Dance brings us back to our embodied experience of the world, an experience that we often seek to escape because of the many limits set on us that are exercised through the disciplining of the body. As Okoye (in Westermann 2005: 73) describes of Lévinas,

the tendency is to flee from oneself, from the reality of defining our physicality, our embodiment, our finitude, our being riveted by the history that has come to constrain our body as object. We flee because our bodies remind us relentlessly of this fact.

It is this fact of the body as object that dancers confront, with, and use as a tool of expression.

What kind of body is dancing? Maqoma's shake

Each form of dance has its own demands and expectations of how a body should move and look. This is one area where power is exercised on the body – it is sculpted and trained to behave in a particular way according to the dance form. This process is related to context in the sense that it is pragmatic, historical and aesthetic. According to Desmond (1998: 157), certain movements are “appropriate to historical and geographical contexts”. In her view, it is important to ask who is dancing, where and how they are dancing. In other words it is essential to focus on the conditions of the dancing (idem). In Maqoma's case, what is clear from his background is the diversity of influences that he has incorporated into the movements he creates. As he describes, “my body is now all these things”. I once asked him to explain to me the origins of each of his movements and he told me that it is impossible to separate them out.

²⁹ In proceedings of the 7th Jomba! Contemporary Dance Conference, *African Contemporary dance? Questioning issues of a performance aesthetic for a developing and ndependent continent* (2004: 32)

Yet, when one observes his dances, there are several key elements that are particular to his use of the body. There is fluidity in the way in which he uses breath to feed the body and initiate movement. At the same time, there are specific breaks in each movement phrase. The sense of anticipation is increased through the holding and releasing movements at unexpected times in the flow of the sequence. Rhythm is created internally, within the body of each performer. There is no obvious relationship between the beat of the music and the counts of the steps. This is the case in much contemporary dance where the movements are almost parallel to the music. This is another break away from ballet, certainly in its classical and romantic periods. In Maqoma's style this use of rhythm results in a snake-like 'shaking' movement that travels through the body in a continuous flow. He has layered this shaking with a sense of sinking to the ground and other characteristic gestures such as his arms floating and his wrists buckling.

There is also what can be described as a 'tension of opposites' where he brings together seemingly opposing dynamics such as depth and lightness, momentum and control. To maintain depth, dancers are required constantly to pull their 'sitting bones' towards the floor; while creating a sense of lightness by focusing their centre of gravity in their abdomens rather than being grounded by rooting themselves through their feet. Momentum is initiated through a dialogue between different body parts, while unexpected shifts in direction create an interruption to the momentum that does not completely break the flow. Lastly, there is an intense focus on repetition – of movement and of sound.

Maqoma has created this style of moving not only in relation to the choreographic influences that he has had, but also because of his particular body shape and its limits. By classical standards (for example in ballet and some modern dance in South Africa), Maqoma's body is not conventional. He has problems with his knees and had to find a new way of centering his gravity for balance and control in his movements. He could not put a lot of weight on his knees as the afro-fusion style at MIDM demanded. So he

innovated another way for himself by lowering his torso to the ground. Therefore the styles that choreographers and dancers choose are often as practical as they are aesthetic.

There are differences in the demands and expectations on the body in different kinds of dance. In classical ballet, for instance, the qualities of movement most valued are lightness and grace (Harris 2000: 67). The body therefore has to ‘float’ and extend its lines. The female body must be long and lean. In Flamenco, by contrast, the ideal body is voluptuous. Hayes (2000: 55) describes what purists of the flamenco style aim for: “spiraling fingers, curved arm movements, and manipulations of her skirt”. The ideal is of Carmen and her “flashing thighs ... , flying dark hair, heavy-lidded eyes, and the cloud of dust that rises from the flurry of her footwork”(ibid: 49). In a completely different context, nineteenth century social dance has strict boundaries between ‘proper’ and ‘improper’ ways of having contact. Desmond (1998: 157) describes drawings in dance manuals that specify the position of the head, arms and upper body and show the distance that should be maintained between male and female dancing partners. In other words, the body is made to move and look a particular way depending on the dance form. It is a clear example of Foucault’s notion of the exercise of power on the body discussed above.

Within dance forms there are also variations. In contemporary dance, for example, Mark Morris requires an ‘ordinary body’ to support his focus on the buttocks and crotch. He uses the *demi-plié* to emphasise the importance of gravity and the relationship between the dancer’s body and the floor. This represents his aim of wanting to get to what is “*underneath*”, focusing on “exposure: something private being revealed, something inside being forced out” (Acocella 1998: 269-271). Individual dancers also have their own ways of moving within a particular genre. The dancers who performed in *Virtually Blond* all brought their own bodily styles to the choreography. They created, copied, adapted, and repeated steps. Of these, certain elements belonged to the steps that Maqoma gave them to perform, and certain movements became the dancers’ own signatures. The dancers were challenged to find ways of imprinting movements onto their bodily memories (cf Ness 1996b) so that they become a part of their being. They needed to find a way of embodying their emotions, with different levels of intensity depending

on the requirements of the performance: least for a run-through, and most for a media viewing or stage performance.

A dancer's training will affect the way that they move and what their body is able to do. A South African choreographer who was trained in physical theatre once remarked to me how Maqoma's dancers in his company VDT are replicas of his way of moving. This choreographer explained this as a contrast to the way in which those who use contact improvisation create movement. In this method, a range of devices are used for movement to emerge spontaneously from the contact of bodies (cf. Novack 1990). Maqoma did not use this in his choreography for *Virtually Blond*. As has been discussed, he would choreograph steps and hand them over to the dancers to embody for themselves. The dancers in this work were all trained in the MIDM company. One of the premises of this training is that dancers have individual body types, and that any of these types can be taught to dance provided they are able to embody the feeling that goes with afro-fusion. While technique is important, uniformity is not. As a result, these dancers were used to expressing their individuality in their dancing. Some of this came through in their dancing in *Virtually Blond*.

This is contrasted with the experience that Maqoma has had working with the dancers of South African Ballet Theatre in his recent work *Neon Flight* (2006). In this choreography he wanted the dancers to break free from the constraints of their training³⁰. He has expressed frustration that they were not working out of the mould of their ballet training. They were not entirely successful. As he explained, "teaching them to do floor-work is like asking them to write in Russian"³¹. Ballet enforces rules on the body that are specific to its form. Each dance form therefore has specific requirements of the body that are based on social convention, practical consideration, approaches to the role of dance, and individual style as in the examples above. Choreographers use the body to make statements that are personal, social and/or political.

³⁰ *Top Billing*, SABC 3, 14 September 2006

³¹ Personal communication, Johannesburg, 11 August 2006

Transgression: the disruptive body

What the discussion has illustrated so far is one way in which power is exercised over the body in dance. In the examples above it is clear that there are different demands and expectations on the body depending on the style and genre, and on practical issues, for example, what body type a dancer has. But this is only one aspect of the discussion. On a broader level, the body is a medium of transgression. It is the primary instrument that is used to cross boundaries, challenge the status quo, invert and disrupt the order. Because the body creates and communicates meaning, this is its subversive potential. Because dance is polyvalent, it has transgressive potential. This is clear in Maqoma's work. He uses the body to address the themes of gender, sexuality and race. What follows is a discussion about the subversion of parameters in contemporary dance through the example of Maqoma's work.

As with Eco's (1984) notion of the sign, the body as a communicative instrument in the signifying process allows for many interpretations. This is useful to a discussion of Maqoma's work because of the ways in which he plays with convention. The bodies of his dancers are never representing one thing or telling a single story. He uses their individual stories and the gestures that they create work that goes directly to those places and issues that are not resolved and that lack clarity. This site of instability is also the site of challenge to official codes. Although much contemporary dance exists in this realm, Maqoma uses the potential of the body to disrupt in a particularly unsettling way (which reinforces the discussion of hybridity in chapter two). He understands that he is working outside of, but also within and against, dominant rules of representation; and as a result his use of the body is especially potent. He does not turn away from its potential to create discomfort, but rather embraces its power as a signifier that operates outside of established norms.

As discussed earlier, the body is positioned in the "semiotic order" (cf Kristeva 1984) and because of this is unstable and open to many possible interpretations. As will be examined below, Maqoma uses this potential to unsettle notions of gender, sexuality and

race in South African society. Bakhtin's notion of the "grotesque body" has a place here because of his conception of a body on the peripheries of society. This body is threatening to social norms (Stallybrass and White, 1986: 23). Maqoma creates images through the body that are a comment on the limits that these norms impose. He is showing that using the body in this way is a powerful mode of critique. As Stallybrass and White (ibid: 26) state:

Somatic symbols ... are ultimate elements of social classification itself.

They speak about the "grotesque" in two ways: 1) "as the 'Other' of the defining group or self", 2) "as a boundary phenomenon of hybridization or inmixing, in which self and other become enmeshed in an inclusive, heterogeneous, dangerously unstable zone" (ibid: 193) – and the first produces the second

When the bourgeoisie consolidated itself as a respectable and conventional body by withdrawing itself from the popular, it constructed the other as a grotesque otherness; but by this act of withdrawal and consolidation it produced *another grotesque*, an identity-in-difference which was nothing other than its fantasy relation, its negative symbiosis, with that which it had rejected in its social practices (ibid: 193)

Analysed through this perspective, Maqoma's work is the necessary otherness to the so-called civilised bodies represented by the new bourgeoisie in South Africa. By placing the body in positions and situations that are uncomfortable or unconventional, Maqoma is contrasting himself with those he is criticizing. He then becomes a necessary component of the way in which the official culture establishment defines itself in opposition to Maqoma.

In the South African context, the body has been marked historically through processes of brutalisation. Under apartheid, for example, the black body was seen as a threat to the "civilization" that the dominant order adopted for itself (cf. Butchart 1999). In post-apartheid South Africa, the body is cast in relation to freedom, and its double standards. The struggle for freedom was radical, but the question remains – how radical is today's society? In this context, dance is an expression of a resurgent body – the body celebrating its freedom, and posing a challenge to its contradictions. In addition, South Africans are

becoming increasingly aware of the body as a threat, of the instability of the body, and of its invasion. With rape statistics rising each year³² and the ever-present HIV/AIDS problem, the body is at the centre of attention in social, political and economic discourse, even when not explicitly framed that way. Even (or especially) rebellious youths who disengage completely from politics and embrace an idea of free expression style their bodies to make statements about the spirit of the ‘Y’ generation³³. It is in this context that Maqoma uses the body to speak – to challenge the idea of race in the ‘new’ South Africa, and to question gender roles and sexuality. This will be explored further below.

The idea of the dancing body as transgressive is not new. A parallel example is found in Daly’s discussion of American audiences’ reading of Isadora Duncan’s body. In Daly’s view, “Duncan’s dancing body was not simply a product of its social and cultural location, or a body on display, it was a product of a process” (Thomas 2003: 173). Duncan’s “dancing body” emerged out of her experiences in late nineteenth and early twentieth century America. She was influenced by the traditions of social dance, physical culture and ballet of that era. Out of the existing practices of the time, she created her “new dance” that included the unconventional practices of dancing solo on the stage for the entire performance and aligning her art with ancient Greece, viewing it as Art not entertainment (Thomas 2003: 171). As Foster (1986: 145 & 147) describes:

The continuous development of her simple phrases of movements, the seeming transparency of her mood and spirit, and the generosity and conviction of her presentation contrasted sharply with the pose-oriented choreography of the late nineteenth-century ballets.

She also evoked the notion of the natural, free feminine through her “natural body”, including its curves, which was in practice a carefully crafted body (Thomas 2003: 171). In her views of the “expressive body”, she made claims to the body being an expression of the soul. Her dancing therefore became “a means of prayer” (Daly 1995: 137). Her approach to the “female body” was to celebrate it and to demystify it, giving it a central place in art (Thomas 2003: 172).

³² In Johannesburg alone there were 1452 cases reported for 2005/6 (The Star Newspaper, Friday 29 September 2006: 1)

³³ cf. Andersson’s (2004) PhD thesis on intertextuality in *Yizo Yizo*, a South African television series aimed at the youth, and Hebdige (1979) on youth subcultures

Daly's analysis of her "body politic" reveals a contradiction in her view of the transformative potential of dance for society. In the 1920s dance became a legitimate art. With this, Duncan shifted her focus away from references to classical Greece, towards social criticism based on a libertarian view of modern dance that would include all classes and races (idem). However, she also defined her dance in opposition to so-called 'primitive' dance, which then included jazz and ragtime. The result of this view was the exclusion of African-American dancers who practiced the popular dances of that era (idem). That said, Duncan transformed the way in which the viewing public saw the place of a dancing, female, American body. The body that she presented on stage disrupted previous notions of what was acceptable for women. It therefore also became a critique to the limits of class and race at the time (even though the way in which she did this was problematic).

Although Maqoma's representation of the body is very different from Duncan's, there are parallels in how Maqoma depicts a black, gendered, sexual body that offers alternatives to the expected notions of how one should be a man, woman, black in the 'new' South Africa. He draws on the possibilities of contemporary dance and breaks with the conventions of forms that require more rigid bodies and more limited models for performance. Contemporary dance such as Maqoma's is powerful in South Africa because it offers the possibility of something new and because it is polyvalent and therefore has the potential to provoke. In *Virtually Blond*, for example, his aim was to reveal what is hidden and expose private wounds publicly. This was an act of power, submission, or empowerment on the part of the dancers, Maqoma, the audience and for South Africa more broadly.

He applied this through a layering of the body, in costume and in what the bodies in this work signified. The discussion here focuses predominantly on the relationship of this to gender and sexuality. In certain ways the bodies presented on stage are androgynous. The three male dancers and one female dancer all wear variations of the same costume. Only the narrator is covered in a long coat. Maqoma explained to Segoe (2004) that he chose

the costumes with the idea that “it fits all genders and it is natural. The belts are for bondage, and they symbolise the sense of locking in your secrets”. Maqoma explained to me that

the costume is about reading the body through our clothes. I wanted something that reveals flesh but at the same time is sophisticated, and uneven, something twisted, asymmetrical, unbalanced and doesn’t fit together.³⁴

The costume designer, Jacques van der Watt from *Black Coffee* described his thoughts about the design:

This piece is about revealing scars, transparency... I’m playing with light and colour. Making clothes pale to light easily. If you change the light you change the clothes. Using quite a lot of textures but not from the fabric, from the cut. Playing with gathering and tucking, straps and buckles so that it looks like things are wrapped up with an option to unwrap and reveal.³⁵

Maqoma is therefore pointing to the politics of making something visible. He asks: what happens when wounds are made public? He is also challenging a denial of these wounds and what has caused them.



Virtually Blond Costumes: Nanhla Mahlangu, Muzi Shili, Luyanda Sidiya, Connie Kau, Thabo Rapoo at photo shoot, Dance Factory, Johannesburg, July 2004

³⁴ Personal communication, Johannesburg, 26 January 2004

³⁵ Personal communication, Johannesburg, 16 February 2004

Androgyny?

How does Maqoma pose his challenges? On the surface in *Virtually Blond* we see an androgyny that is stripped as the work progresses. What the end of the work leaves us with is a shift in power and an inversion of gender. On one level there is no distinction between the male and female bodies on stage, as with much contemporary dance (unlike ballet where certain movements are exclusive to men and others to women – I will talk about this later). They perform the same movements and wear similar costumes. However, Maqoma added to his mix a separation between Radebe and the male dancers at certain key moments in the work. He also portrayed the men in a particular way as men. In other words, although Maqoma is dealing with the question of visibility in general, this was translated specifically into the theme of gender through the way in which he cast the male and female performers. Maqoma explained to me that he chose the dancers that he did because of the way that they moved and the content of the stories that they shared with him. But the way in which he placed them on the stage in relation to one another, and encouraged them to find out about each other's secrets in movement and touch, resulted in a story about gender represented through their bodies.

When this choreography was developed for an outreach programme in schools in January 2005, the dancers worked with the theme of abuse. In this process, a clearer narrative was attached to the roles of the men and the women in the dance. In the first version of *Virtually Blond* the focus was on the original stories of the individuals involved. The articulations of gender relations came out in the process of making the work. For example, Maqoma placed the female figure in the centre of the 'seduction scene' and told the male dancers to cover themselves before and after seducing the woman. Maqoma was using their male and female bodies to create a scene about a gender relationship. This then became material for discussions in schools about abuse and the integrity of the body.

For the first three quarters of the work, only the males moved across the stage. The female stood in the background. When she finally did come forward, she was singled out

in different ways, which makes it difficult to ignore her gendered body. She became an abused woman figure, a prostitute, a victim, an abuser, free only in her fantasy of pleasure with men. The sex of the male dancers' bodies was also highlighted. For example, they held/protected/covered their genitals with cupped hands – this gesture conveys something about the male body. These men looked wounded, ashamed, broken, desiring. Gender is therefore a key level of signification through the body in this work. Gender in dance is linked very specifically to the kind of body on stage. Although contemporary dance breaks the mould of classical ballet, for instance, by expecting the same of men and women, it is difficult to deny that the bodies on stage are male and female. In other words, the distinctions between male and female bodies make statements about gender because of their differences in biology.

In the example of ballet, Foster (1996: 1) describes the roles of men and women: “these two bodies, because of their distinctly gendered behaviour, dance out a specific kind of relationship between masculine and feminine”. In other words, the gender roles are tied to the biological distinctions between males and females. This is illustrated in the movements in ballet. For example, she does intricate footwork while he leaps into the air, she wears points, he wears slippers, he lifts her, she never lifts him – he is strength, she is beauty. Foster (idem) explains that “*she* is persistently put forward, the object of his adoration”. Inherent in this, according to Foster, is a level of inequality between the sexes. The same kinds of gender distinctions can be found in Flamenco, for example, where the male dancer is expected to be aggressive and as Washabough (1998: 40) describes, “almost ferocious in his posture and movement”. The female represents the bull that he is taming, or his cloak.

While Maqoma is working outside of the framework of these distinctions, the way in which he uses the body points to issues of gender difference and inequality. He is opening up the space to examine what it means to be a man or a woman in South Africa. He does so through particular gestures and relationships between the dancers on stage. The gesture of the men clutching their genitals, for example, became a motif through the work. In a rehearsal on 28 January 2004, Maqoma explained the meaning behind this:

“it’s all here (*showing Rapoo that he must hold his genitals*), the problem is here...you want a piece of cake”. Metaphorically, this cake is the female figure – Maqoma wanted Rapoo to desire a piece of Kau/Radebe. This gesture relates more broadly to the “dog trio” (my label), where the three men fight over an imaginary bone. Maqoma created this because he wanted to represent “men who turn themselves into dogs”³⁶. Bester (the South African director and performer), interpreted these gestures by the men as an image:

of the men becoming pathetic, boyish, fumbling in the pelvic region, playing with their penises in a non-sexual, emasculated way.³⁷

Additionally, Maqoma wanted to portray the vulnerability of men. He encouraged Rapoo and Sidiya to create a tension between their bodies³⁸:

To Sidiya: “get your face into his body”

To Rapoo: “really go inside with your body, get closer to him, like you’re rubbing yourself against him”

The example of Maqoma’s challenges to masculinity and femininity can be understood within the broader context of ways in which gender is constructed. Burt (2001: 46-47), for example, examines the limits on the behaviour of males in society and how these are translated into theatre dance. The context of this study is the development of modern approaches to the body, where it is set up as a problem to be solved. Anxieties in the nineteenth century about the body as procreative, productive, and healthy (cf Synott 1993), for instance, changed the criteria for body display. Women were seen as biologically vulnerable, measured against the norm of the male body, and were therefore excluded from public life (cf Henning 1999). Men were also locked into their biology – they may have been physically stronger but were also a threat because of their uncontrollable lusts and desires (cf Zipes 1986). Women more than men therefore evoked the ballet ideal because it was believed that women were on a higher moral plane, even though they were physically weaker (Burt 2001: 47). A woman’s body in ballet therefore has to be light and ethereal as described earlier (cf Aalten 1997).

³⁶ In rehearsal, Johannesburg, 29 January 2004

³⁷ Personal communication, Johannesburg, 29 January 2004

³⁸ In rehearsal, Johannesburg, 4 February 2004

A key parallel example is Cowan's (1990) study in which she frames gender as an "asymmetrical social relation" and examines how it is "socially constructed" through dance in the Sohos community in Northern Greece (ibid: 6). She describes this generally as a patriarchal context in which a man has a claim to his wife's body. This is vividly manifest at formal evening dances, where the central focus is the married couple and the husband is seen as the "patriarchal head of the family" and his wife as "the lady of the house" (ibid: 170). For women, dance is a "pleasure but also a problem" because of the ambivalence surrounding female sexuality. Women are invited to express themselves freely in dance, but are criticised if they do so with too much abandon, depending on the particular context (ibid: 188-190). Women are defined by their bodies (ibid: 198) – as in the discussion above. Their sexuality is controlled through a system of surveillance of young girls by married women on behalf of men. While male responses to a girl's sexuality may be seen as aggressive, it is at the same time an acknowledgement of them (ibid: 199).

In wedding celebrations, for instance, male aggressiveness and female passivity are celebrated where young men who form part of the groom's party are seen as "wife-takers". They dance in the *pathinada*, which means "stepping", and refers both to the procession of men dancing to the bride's house and the type of dancing in this procession. In the wedding ritual, this is a time for men to express their masculinity, both individually and with reference to one another, where young men learn how far they can push the limits of their relationships with other men (ibid: 98-113). By contrast, girls who form part of the groom's party do not drink as much as the men; they are not responsible for choosing the songs that the musicians will play; their bodies remain composed and contained; and they may only lead a dance if a male relative places them in the circle (ibid: 115). Female Sohoians are taught not to take initiative, especially when in the company of men (ibid: 163).

Maqoma is challenging these norms in his work. In particular he questions the expectations on the behaviour of men and women. His general approach is to show that gender is not a fixed way of being. He opens up the space for the exploration of different

possibilities for men and women by challenging the social demands that define gender relationships in a particular way. A potent way in which he does this is through the theme of sexuality. Sexuality, over and above gender, points to the complex relationship between the body and society.

Heterosexuality?

Sexuality is not dependent on gender distinctions. Choice of sexual partner or sexual identity is not determined by the social roles attached to men and women, although it is often expected to be so. Additionally, the whole notion of homosexuality is a modern construct (cf Foucault 1984). There are clear examples in anthropology to illustrate these points. Alexayeff (2000), for instance, examines the *laelae* performances in the Cook Islands to show the distinctions between gender roles and sexual preference. Men who perform in drag are not necessarily homosexual. They play the role of women, but may choose men or women as their sexual partners. Gay (1986) too demonstrates how sexuality is fluid in her discussion of female same-sex relationships in Lesotho. In this example, women engage in relationships with other women for a time before partnering with a man. These examples show how the relationship between gender and sexuality is often determined by the norms that define it. Maqoma plays with the idea that definitions of sexuality are constructed in order to challenge the status quo.

Maqoma often deals with the issue of sexuality in his work. It is a central theme in his life, although he creates work that raises questions about sexual identity without wanting to be limited to it. He explains that:

It is still very hard for me to come out and say that I'm gay. I don't express it openly... I would like to be seen as a male who happens to have an interest in other males...I wouldn't say that I create works that reflect gayness, but are about identity or a response to a place where I come from where such issues are taboo.³⁹

³⁹ Personal communication, Johannesburg, 20 September 2004

However, the issue of his sexuality comes through clearly in his work. As Gerard Bester described:

His exploration, his playfulness, the style shifts are part of him. There is a gay sensibility, a sensuality: all these men, men exploring sexuality.⁴⁰

Examples include *Miss Thandi* and *Southern Comfort* where men in dresses play the role of women as a way of inverting gender roles and questioning the construction of femininity and masculinity. Maqoma often works specifically with male dancers to make statements about the role of men in society. He explains that:

Men are seen as tough cookies, but if we return to our innocence there is a woman in all of us, a sensitive part. In *Virtually Blond* we refer to men as dogs, in power. But again, that's not actually true... It's about who's more powerful in a situation and how a person uses and abuses that power.⁴¹

During one rehearsal for *Virtually Blond*, the possibility of an on-stage kiss between Rapoo and Sidiya emerged. It was where their heads were positioned at the end of a movement phrase. They had great difficulty with this and chose to stop just before the kiss. This was because of the suggestion of homosexuality that would have been portrayed by it. One of the dancers became upset during the rehearsal process because an individual who had watched a studio run had asked him if he had become gay. The men in this work had to deal with their own points of discomfort in order to represent the role of men more generally.

Cowan reveals the complex relations of gender, sexuality and the body, and how these come to life through dance. As she states, "dancing...is an activity in which the body is both a site of experience (for the dancer) and a sign (for those who watch the dancer) in which sexuality – as a culturally specific complex of ideas, feelings, and practices – is deeply embedded" (Cowan 1990: 4). In the case of *Virtually Blond*, the theme of sexuality is clear not only in the movements that look sexual, but also in how Maqoma dressed his dancers, stripping them of their pants at the end, leaving them partly vulnerable in their underwear.

⁴⁰ Personal communication, Johannesburg, 27 February 2004

⁴¹ Personal communication, Johannesburg, 20 September 2004

Segoe (2004) interviewed one of the dancers on undressing:

having to undress was a challenge, and it gets better with time, though I'm not used to body exposure.

Maqoma explained that he wanted them to remove their costumes during the work to reinforce the idea of visibility, and to create “embarrassment, sense of cleansing, getting rid of it, but that stays inside you”⁴². What followed the stripping of the pants was the inversion of the original opening by the narrator – with his strong male voice. The female dancer found her voice after challenging/punishing each male in turn. So, on one level, this work is about commonalities in human experience and what we all share in our suffering, but it is also about the particular struggles of men and women as sexual beings, and the place of power in these struggles.⁴³

Being black

From the discussion above it is clear that the body is the nexus for statements to be made about gender and sexuality in society. The same is true for race. Maqoma does not like to define his work as “gay” or “black” choreography⁴⁴. However, his attitudes to both sexuality and race feature in his work. Although he does not deal with issues of race explicitly, the fact that he is a black South African affects his approach. As he explains:

If I was white, my work would have been different because I would have had a different view of how things are in this country. My work is a response to my circumstances.⁴⁵

The bodies in *Virtually Blond* are also black bodies, involved in relations of power on stage, and speaking to issues of power beyond the stage. Maqoma expressed to me that he prefers to work with black men when he said “I like my coffee black”⁴⁶. Although this

⁴² Personal communication, Johannesburg, 4 August 2004

⁴³ A case in point is the rape trial of former South African deputy president Jacob Zuma. On 8 May 2006 he was found not guilty of raping a woman who had been staying over at his house. The trial raised issues of gender politics and power. What came out of the verdict was a patriarchal attitude towards women and stereotypical views of a rape scenario that discounted the politics and subtleties at play. It revealed the deep sensitivities attached to judgements made about private sexual acts and abuses of power

⁴⁴ Personal communication, Johannesburg, 20 September 2004

⁴⁵ *idem*.

⁴⁶ Personal communication, Johannesburg, 9 February 2004

may have also been about his private life, he also works mostly with black male dancers. He explained his reasoning behind this:

It's natural for me to connect with a figure that's identical to me – a male black figure. I feel like I can direct my views very strongly. I am unusually sensitive about the female object because I think I understand the disadvantage that women have, especially black women. At the same time, I relate much more with the male energy.⁴⁷

Although race is a theme in Maqoma's practice, he also transcends the issue of race. In this way, his attitude to race is another instance in which he challenges the status quo. There is an expectation that he must talk about blackness because of the history in South Africa and his place in it. However, he does not wish to make direct statements about race issues. A parallel is the example of Alvin Ailey, as discussed in chapter two. He was expected to deal with "Negro" themes because he was black. Maqoma, too, prefers not to be limited by that framework. As he expressed:

With the black body you say a lot before you do anything. The perception is that you're black, you're strong, you don't cry, you're not allowed to feel any emotions... I deal with social comments, but I never spell it out – I never say there's white and there's black. I don't want to go there. I've never seen things as black and white, even my work is colour blind.⁴⁸

Conclusion

Maqoma uses the body in a particular way that is disruptive to the norms imposed by the official culture establishment. This idea was introduced earlier in the thesis through the discussion of his work as hybrid and thereby threatening to the projects of a purist nationalism. This chapter extends this idea by examining Maqoma's use of the body, particularly in *Virtually Blond*. It has shown that the body is a crucial signifier in making statements about social issues. It is the primary instrument in dance and has particular potency when this dance is as challenging as Maqoma's has the potential to be. He uses the body in unexpected ways to speak to questions of gender, sexuality, power and race

⁴⁷ Personal communication, Johannesburg, 17 August 2006

⁴⁸ *idem*.

in South Africa. The alternatives that Maqoma offers for South Africa are crucial to its new democracy. This will be explored further in the following chapter drawing on the ideas developed so far. It places Maqoma again in his social context and examines the reality of being a performing artist in the 'new' South Africa. It argues strongly for the place of the performing arts as central to the creation and consolidation of democracy.