

Alwin Nikolais. The humanist of the abstract

Time is the essence of change (...) Time evolves in space.
Our dreams shape space and time beyond the capacity of the body (...) In dance, our bodies are privileged to carry out some of this shaping of time in space¹.

Alwin Nikolais



**TORI
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Torinodanza è un progetto della Città di Torino realizzato dal Teatro Regio di Torino

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Alwin Nikolais (Southington, Connecticut, 1910 - New York, 1993), choreographer, musician, American pedagogue, father of the multimedia and theoriser of dancing as the “**visual art of motion**”, was a master of 20th-century theatre. In the Fifties, his metaphoric and psychedelic “**total dance theatre**”, close to certain suggestions of the abstract expressionism of Pollock and de Kooning, and inspired by the Einstein’s theory of relativity, revolutionised, as also Merce Cunningham did with a different approach to movement and performance, the postwar American modern dance.

He called his productions a “polygamy of motion, shape, color and sound”, a multidimensional environment whose choreography, scenery, costumes, slides, lights and concrete synthesizer music (Nikolais was one of the first to buy a Moog) all bore his signature. Surreal visions in which the human body was prepotently part of the environment. Bodies imbued with a decentralised technique, bodies as marionettes, yet animated by a passion rendered all the more perceptible by the transfer of self into something else through the qualified movement of the dance (“motion”, as Nikolais called it). A “transcendence” through which to confer shape on time and space, to capture with the body qualities germane to other parts of the universe, objects, plants, animals and imaginary beings, but also, something that must not be underestimated, qualities of human nature. A body highly virtuous, therefore, capable of creating suggestions when moving inside a sack, dancing in prosthesis costumes, or even in a simple unisex leotard, bathed in a shower of coloured lights designed by the craftsman Nikolais. In line with the title of Torinodanza’s *Focus 3 Corpi virtuosi*, this is the key to understanding our return to the world of the American master: to start from the body in search of a fuller realisation of the worth of the dancer within the mix. For Nikolais, much more of a humanist than is generally believed,

devoted great attention in his abstract theatre to the sensory and intuitive perception of the individual dancer.

The art of “motion” teaches an awareness of gestures in relation to the laws of universal movement (gravity, centripetal and centrifugal force, momentum, etc.). Yet the dynamics of the movement of an individual person, as constantly called for by Nikolais in the practice of improvisation and composition,² is animated by personal, motivational energies (motivation as the source of gestures is a basic tenet of the Nikolais technique): they activate the physical energies that drive the body to action and hence its moving metamorphosis.

Nikolais died in May 1993. In June 2002, Murray Louis, dancer, choreographer, writer and teacher, who had worked with him for more than forty years (they were known as Nik and Murray in the dance world), suggested to his friends and colleagues, Shirley Ririe and Joan Woodbury, formerly on the teaching staff of Utah University and long-time followers of Nikolais, that their Ririe-Woodbury Dance Company should put on a show with Nik’s choreographies. The outcome was “Alwin Nikolais: A Celebration Tour”, a memorial *tournee* consisting of an evening performance of seven pieces from his repertoire during the years 1953 to 1987. *Noumenon Mobilus* (or *Mobilis*, subsequently just *Noumenon*) was one of the principal pieces on the “total dance theatre” playbill *Masks, Props and Mobiles* staged in 1953 at the Henry Street Playhouse, the East Side theatre where Nikolais taught and worked with his very young company from 1948.

Noumenon Mobilus was Nik’s first exploration of the abstract. Two (subsequently three) dancers moved completely enwrapped in a sack made of elasticised cloth to provide an essay in the aesthetic communication of the sculptural potential of “motion”. An elasticity ideated on the picture of a large drop of mercury. *Tensile Involvement*, the choreographer’s signature piece, was first staged in 1955, as Murray Louis³ has confirmed from New York. It confers visibility and energy on the three-dimensionality of space with a spider’s web of elastic threads that the dancers quickly stretch and weave across the stage to become a metaphorical projection of the body of the universe.

Prism (1956) represents another U-turn in Nik’s career on account of its choreographic and surrealistic use of lights in parts such as *Tridom* and *Finale*. For the tour, Murray chose the extract called *Lythic* (a fanciful combination of “lyrical” and “mythical”). This piece is not well known, yet offers a perfect demonstration of another feature of Nik’s theatre, namely that the quality of “motion” can be determined by the choice of costumes. Sinuous elastic garments with geometrical hats in which to give substance to a fascinating ceremonial of timeless mythological figures. The illusions of Nik’s “lighting environment”, too, belong to another *Finale*: that in the programme, taken from *Liturgies* (1983). This is a multimedia ritual of shadows and silhouettes in which the bodies are the leading players in a hypnotic changing of shapes. “The culmination of a suite of dances”, according to the Nikolais/Louis Foundation for Dance, “dealing with faith and fervour”. For a fuller understanding of Nik’s warm and humour-laden abstractionism, due weight should be attached to the suggestions

proposed to the dancers during the creation or revival of the repertoire and then translated on the stage into mixtures of dynamics, space, time and form. Suggestions whose hints lie in certain titles. *Mechanical Organ* (1980) is a festival of the body, a joyful suite of dances, two of which have subjects a tad extravagant for a pure abstractionist: *Two Together* and particularly *Two not yet Together* (or *Two Involved* and *Two not yet Involved*). A further demonstration that the "art of motion" does not preclude the exploration of any subject, even an emotional subject, as in the duet of a man and a woman on stools in *Two not yet Together*.

Nik offered many surprising themes. The illusory *Crucible* (1985) is a piece on the evolution of man entrusted to a dismemberment of the body represented by the interplay of mirror surfaces. Another stance is imposed by *Blank on Blank* (1987), described as "depictions of a nihilistic society set in the colourless starkness of white on white", a desolation that, in Nik's "art of motion" becomes a choreography in everyday clothes on the dynamic qualities of time. Alienated suspensions and unexpected explosions of movement to depict a social climate whose incredible theatrical background is a projection of the New York Stock Exchange.

Francesca Pedroni

¹ A. Nikolais, *The Unique Gesture*, unpublished text, chapter devoted to the subject of "time". Murray Louis, dancer, choreographer and much esteemed collaborator with Nikolais from the Forties until his death, has spent much time on editing Nik's writings and drafting on the philosophy and pedagogy of Nikolais/Louis technique. This work is now complete. Its title is *Nikolais/Louis Technique: The Unique Gesture* and it will be published by the American house of Routledge Press.

² Nik creates from improvisations and compositions, a method borrowed from the German choreographer and pedagogue Hanya Holm, herself a former dancer in the company Mary Wigman, who moved to America in the Thirties.

³ On the occasion of the Celebration Tour, Murray Louis's careful research in the archives has shown that, contrary to what has been so far published in the most documents and videos dealing with Nikolais, *Tensile Involvement* made its debut at the Henry Street Playhouse in 1955 and not 1953. In answer to our telephone call on 13 January 2004, Louis explained: "We have found that in 1953 this title was assigned to a work by the school's students, whereas the well-known *Tensile Involvement* of Nikolais appeared for the first time in 1955".