

VIDEOTAPE DANCE THERAPY

by Louis Jaffe

In the past two years I have videotaped seven of Luly Goldin's dance therapy sessions at the Turtle Bay School of Music in New York City. Luly ostensibly teaches people how to become dance therapists, but her sessions usually turn out to be therapy for those involved. Her method does not consist in playing records and getting people to dance. All of the sessions I taped or participated in (I was a member of the group two semesters, then I returned as a guest to tape) took place without musical accompaniment.

The sessions begin with Luly's instruction to the ten participants to "start working" which means that people stop talking and smoking cigarettes and try to express their feelings by movement. This is difficult at first, and the group usually fans out across the room (which has been anything from a small auditorium to a twelve by twenty foot practice room at the school) to go through a personal process of getting into their movements or non-movements.

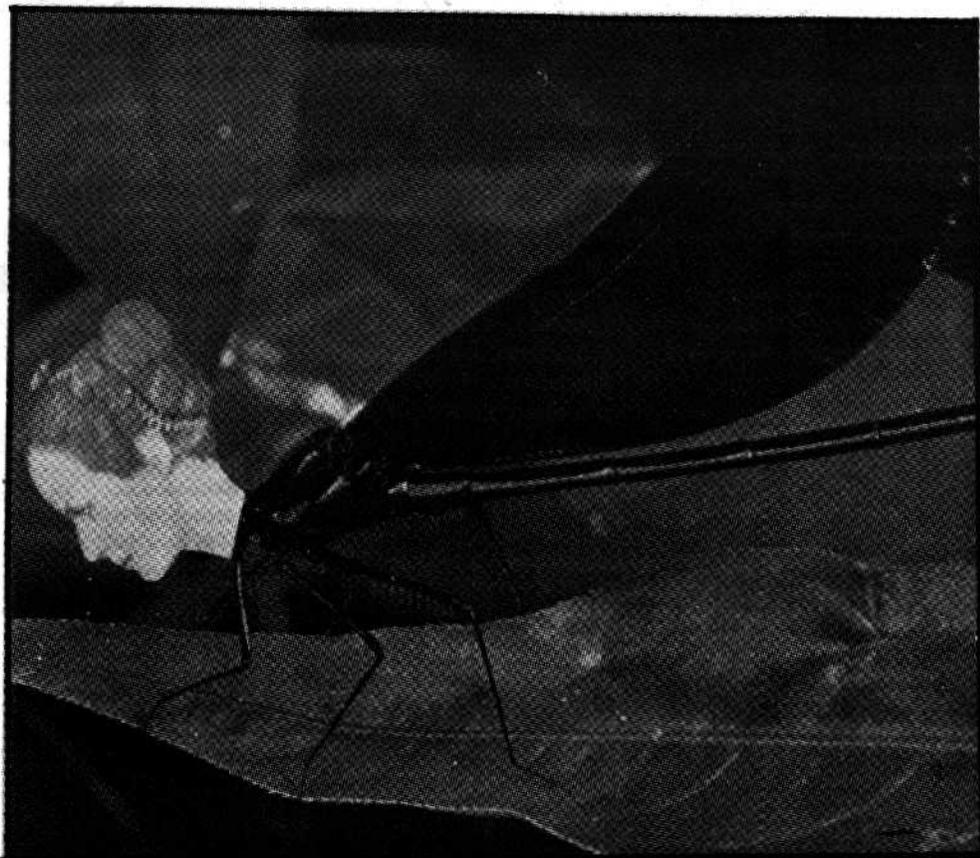
In a few minutes people may begin to dance with each other, fight, mirror each other's movements. Couples or threesomes begin dramatic interchanges while others remain detached, into themselves. Luly sits at the edge of the room, always watching. Her therapist's role consists in watching the movement for some key development, like the sudden shift in two people from lovers' gestures to hostile ones, or a barely perceptible change in their body attitudes.

As soon as she sees this (and her wisdom as a therapist is in being able to see it and make people aware of it) she stops the session. From this point on, most of the group become spectators while the people Luly has singled out continue to develop the feeling they are working on. The intensification that results from taking people and setting them out in front of the rest of the group almost always develops into an emotional outburst. Most often it is tears, sometimes rage, sometimes affection.

Usually, an outburst like this ends the session. After a review of what happened, during which everyone gratefully shrugs off the all-too-heavy expression through movement and reverts back to smoking and talking, the group breaks up. The session usually lasts two and a half hours.

I began taping as soon as Luly asked the people to start working, and kept the tape rolling continuously until she called a stop. Then instead of discussing the events of the last few minutes we immediately played back the tape. After watching the tape sometimes people talked about it, and sometimes we went right into the second phase of the session where most of the group along with the camera became spectators while one or two or four of the people went further with what they were doing. This stage too I taped entirely. As I said, it often ended in tears or violence although sometimes with great tenderness. Even those who became hysterical watched the playback immediately and were calmed by their interest in seeing themselves go through such a thing.

We taped seven sessions out of forty, two each semester. Luly didn't want more taping than that, which I think is another credit to her therapist's judgment. If watching yourself in videotape replay becomes the main reason for doing things, then the quality of the experience is debased. Videotape had to be a special event in the routine of the sessions. This gave the insights from video feedback shock value which was not dulled by repetition of the experience in later sessions.



Within each session there was also the danger of overloading the participants with video feedback experience. We found that shorter periods of taping were better than longer. Sometimes I had twenty minute reels of tape and sometimes thirty minute. The temptation was always to record the whole length of the tape and then to watch the whole tape. But half an hour of the group watching itself proved to be just too long. Somewhere after the twentieth minute of watching the just-finished session on TV, boredom set in, which mixed in a peculiarly irritating way with the continued fascination of the feedback. Twenty minutes proved to be an easier length, and many times we stopped after five or ten.

We usually did only two cycles of recording and feedback; sometimes three. After watching the last playback, there usually wasn't much to add in words. The sometimes prolonged post-session discussions of non-videotaped groups didn't happen after people saw themselves. As Luly said: "I can tell somebody, 'You really hated that person, and he can deny it. But on the videotape he sees something concrete, something that he cannot deny'".

I used a half inch portable for all the sessions, and every time but one I kept it plugged into a wall outlet, not moving the recording deck at all. In the limited environment of the room I relied on the zoom lens to get me in close to details of the activity. Rather than use a tripod and limit flexibility of camera movement I chose to hand-hold the camera, and because hand-holding for an hour of continuous taping can generate an extraordinary case of muscle tension, I chose to sit in a chair most of the time, steadying the camera by resting my elbow on my knee.

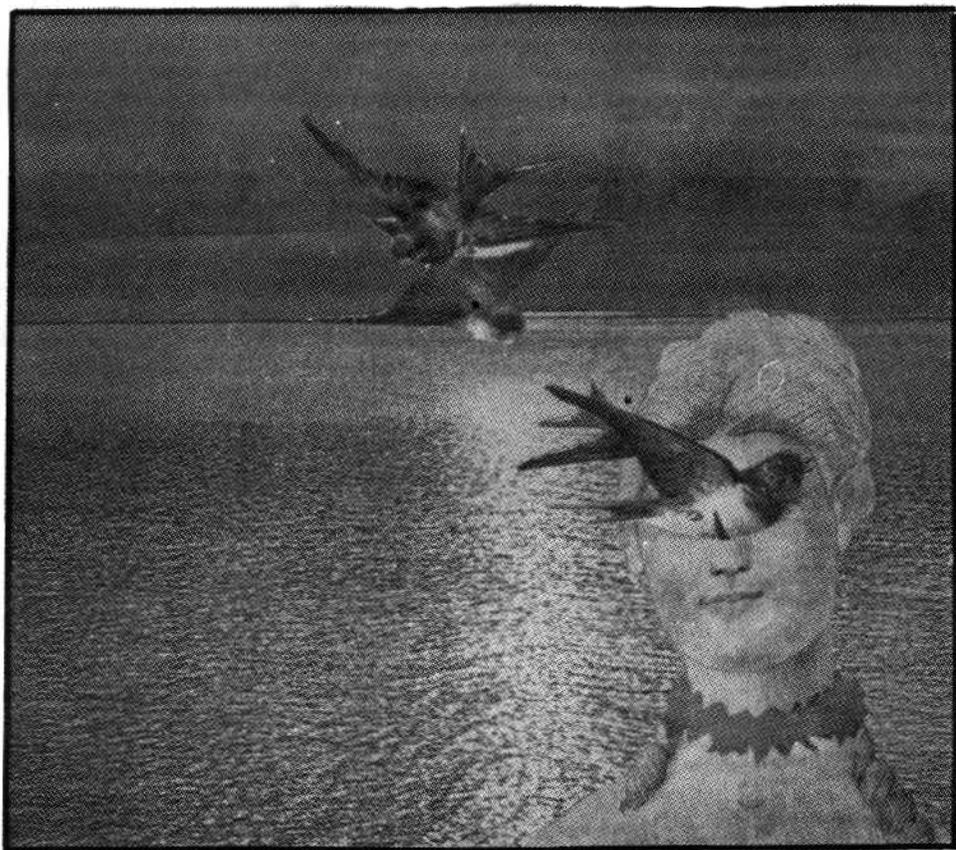
Once I left my post on the edge of the room and waded into the middle of the action wearing the portapak over my shoulder. The camera was fitted with a ten millimeter wide angle lens which has enough depth of focus so that I didn't have to adjust it, leaving me free to move with the people, trucking in, out, and through. This added a much larger component of camera-oriented performance on the part of the group (as opposed to un-camera-conscious interrelating).

Luly and I differed over whether the camera should be a detached observer or a participant in the action. She asked me a couple of times during taping to join in the activities with the camera, but after the first experiment I didn't feel like doing it again. Luly herself always stayed on the edge in order to oversee the action, and I felt that this was the camera's place too. Just once or twice during forty sessions Luly felt impelled to leave her place and join the movement, and this option should be open to the cameraman.

A few times people were asked to specifically address themselves to the camera in their actions; this produced some extreme selfconsciousness and some spirited performances. Taping group movement from the edge of the room did not produce too much selfconsciousness. Luly thought that the taping seemed to inhibit some people, but that it intensified the experience for many. I'd say that the richest feedback was people seeing themselves as taped when they weren't aware of the camera. Awareness of the camera seemed to short-circuit the feedback qualities of playback.

Technically, I always tried to make my camerawork as inobtrusive as possible. Trying to keep an overview of all that was happening in the room while also following closely the more dramatic developments, I found myself alternately zooming out to wide angle and panning across the whole group, and zooming back into telephoto to catch the intensity of faces pressed together or hands reaching out. Always I panned and zoomed with measured slowness—I wanted to stay below the threshold where camera movements and zooms are so slow that they become invisible. In these unedited, real-time recordings I wanted to make the changes that were happening in the group clear and visually interesting through a tape without technical distractions. The life of the recordings was short; none was watched more than once, and all were soon recorded over.

Once Luly operated the camera herself for the session (with the fixed focal length ten millimeter lens to eliminate the complication of focusing and zooming) and her therapist's vision showed through even though she had never held a camera before. In the future I hope she chooses to get into the equipment. The therapist and the cameraman should be one person.



collage: J. Sibert