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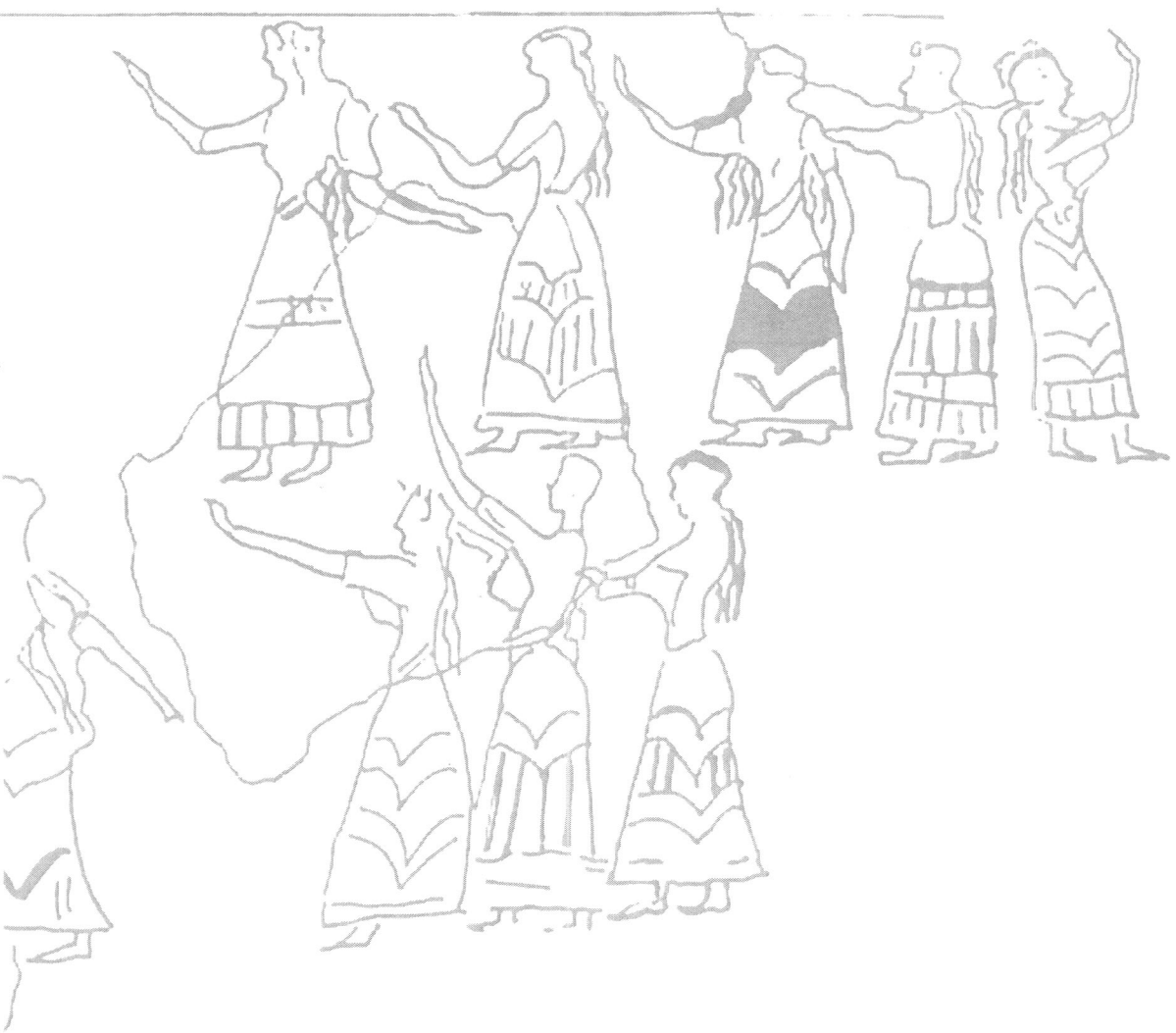
Performance and Media Reviews and Project Reports



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Gloss, Grit, Dance/Story

THE COST OF LIVING

a film by Lloyd Newson. 2004. DV8 Physical Theatre.

Lloyd Newson's directorial debut in film, *The Cost of Living* (2004), is a work so rich with reference that after feasting on its thirty-four minutes, I feel as though I have swallowed a novel. The cinematic adaptation of a piece he developed for the stage in 2000 (*Can We Afford This/The Cost of Living*), Newson's film takes up his avowed commitment to make works that are *about* something. A scintillating blend of gloss and grit, *Cost* serves up the world as carnival but also penetrates its underbelly, exposing the seamy side of the circus. The result is sensually stunning but has teeth; and though it is adamantly a narrative work, dance pulses firmly at its brooding heart.

Set against a quiet seaside town, the film follows the trajectory of Newson's previous works, allowing him yet another platform for commenting on the human condition in general and the lives of men in particular. Through the adventures of two down-on-their-luck friends and an extraordinary supporting cast, Newson interrogates personal and societal definitions of manhood, raising questions along the way about desire, friendship, scopic regimes, exploitation, and the place of labor in self-definition. As always, the director of DV8 Physical Theatre foregrounds the body as he weaves an uncommon and evocative tale, and while he has publicly eschewed dance for its own sake, the movement scenes are both formal in their construction and stylistically versatile.

The two men who constitute the heart of the film are Eddie (Kay), a young laborer who up-and-quits his meaningless job as a carnival performer in the film's opening scene, and David (Toole), a man whose body begins from the waist up. Fast-talking, high-strung, and self-absorbed, Eddie bristles with energy so searing that I wonder if he will explode before the film ends. David, with his massive shoulders and virtuosic agility, looks as though he may implode: he is brooding, laconic, and self-aware. Both men are portrayed as the objects of intense, internalized cultural scrutiny, as they embark on a series of alternative money-making schemes while fending for themselves within the strictures of their coastal environment.

Additional characters include a third friend, Rowan (Thorpe), who sports a perpetually blank face, soaks up the activities around him with dispassionate wonder, and utters not a single word; yet he establishes a vital presence in the narrative and performs one of the film's most memorable scenes. Vivien Wood plays Beth, the leggier-than-thou ballerina, who manages to morph between seductress, exploited woman, and the personification of physical agency within a series of succinct but powerful appearances. Another mute but memorable character is the slinky, tattooed hula-hoop performer (Kareena Oates) who loops her way through the tale, lassoing and repelling admirers with steely equanimity and astonishing skill. And then there is Newson's protean band of dancers, the current, project-specific incarnation of DV8 Physical Theatre, delivering exquisite passages of movement that are woven into the film and remain as essential to the unfolding drama as any moment of dialogue, musical selection, or the murmurings of the sparkling sea itself, swishing rhythmically to and fro throughout the film's background.

Newson explores the idea of being half a man from the film's earliest moments. We first meet Eddie as a member of a human jack-in-the-box act on the boardwalk. Costumed in a clown mask topped with a fringe

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of carrot-red hair, he belongs to an indistinguishable sextet of torsos, situated along a set of wooden stairs that conceal the lower body. Accompanied by the bent notes of a calliope-inspired score, the clown-heads snap right and left with militaristic precision until Eddie rips off his mask and breaks formation. Voicing a stream of existential laments, he decries the group's working conditions and the demeaning nature of the job, all the while barking insults to latecomers among the straggling audience. Even the minimal movement score for this scene is richly conceived and executed: the clowns' torsos pump up and down like an organ-grinder's bellows, heads alternately turning, rotating, and shimmying against the sapphire sky (see Figure 1). Meanwhile, Eddie's revolt is announced through both embodied and verbal gestures: using physical counterpoint and syncopation, Eddie's head movements palpably support his verbal diatribe. Though he returns briefly to the fold of the group's motion, he finally folds up shop altogether, hurling one last lecture at the onlookers. As the crowd disburses, Eddie lifts the lower flap of the troupe's ladder-like set to release David, stowed away beneath the bottom rung. Though Eddie's distinctive dialect constitutes an unfortunate flaw of the film for English speakers unaccustomed to his rapid-fire Scottish delivery, Newson has already articulated through him the film's engagement with the deceptions of appearance: the clowns' exuberant colors hover seductively against the azure sky, but their implication in meaningless labor and its conflation with self-worth are adamantly rejected.

A pair of ensuing scenes features Eddie and David relaxing in their apartment, then flirting to no avail with Beth and another dancer who cavort, in long-limbed Cunningham fashion—cool and removed—on the lawn beneath the men's window. The camera moves in close as the two friends return to their room and apply makeup in preparation for one of several attempts to cash in on David's disability. In this particular ploy, the masks are gone but their garish colors remain, now transferred directly onto the skin, underscoring the futility of abandoning one exploitive post only to replace it with another. As Eddie proceeds to push the bow-tied David downhill on a scooter, Newson shoots from the bottom of the incline, amplifying the precipitous nature of the ride, its risk, and its recklessness. Both men smile through painted lips, but we fear for David, whose compact body, mere inches above the ground,

Figure 1. The Cost of Living. *Photo from the film. Used by permission of Leila Darwish, DV8 Physical Theatre.*

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might hurtle disastrously onto the pavement with a single wrong move.

Daylight gives way to evening, and Rowan joins the pair under a string of naked light bulbs as they connive their way into a bar, carrying David as currency. Suspending him at arms length on a small pallet between them, the men cut to the front of the line, requesting the use of a toilet for their disabled friend—but not before Eddie has availed himself of the opportunity to goad several patrons waiting in the silent queue. He is an equal-opportunity aggressor, chattering acerbically about his lack of employment and jibing one unsuspecting customer after another: "I'm a man, but without a job I'm fuckin' nothing!" he asserts to a woman in the line; then, to another, "What? You think that's funny?" Inside, the music shifts to a solo electric guitar over a pulsing drumbeat, and checked only by the passive placement of Rowan's hand on his shoulder, Eddie ricochets repeatedly about him, like a bobbing tether-ball around its pole. Head movements dominate his motion, the neck jutting sharply from one direction to another, as he shrieks a partially unintelligible litany of desperation. The camera work here is dynamic, zooming in so close to Eddie's vibrating head that his face distorts, then moving out just enough to frame his propulsive relationship to Rowan, anchored but ever-impassive. Finally, as Rowan redirects his friend toward an exit, two silken legs stride into view atop a pair of shiny silver pumps. It is Beth, who replaces Rowan at Eddie's side, and the two commence a heated duet, her torso spinning like a top above the scissors of her legs, Eddie bopping in frenzied circles around her.

In one of the most potent juxtapositions of the film, Newson splices in and out of this high-intensity scene to a quieter one that is nonetheless disarming. David, poised atop a deserted bar in a darkened corner, addresses the viewer directly. Paddling himself back and forth on extended arms, he glides along the gleaming wooden surface, toying overtly with the camera and us, its audience: "Would you like to dance? Don't be embarrassed. . . . Can you imagine these [arms] wrapped around you? I know, maybe it's the ass. I bet you're wondering, what's it like?" The scene cuts back to Eddie, still pulsing maniacally around Beth, now peeling off his shirt, now reaching for his crotch and groping her breasts until she follows him, hips swiveling, out of the frame. A final shot of David shows him extending his arms in a gesture of invitation, then teasing after a couple of sensuous turns, "I saw you looking." Here, Newson casts the viewer as voyeur, unpeeling layers of scopic scrutiny within and among the characters while prodding the complicit gaze of the audience.

Fast-forward to one of the film's most disturbing comments on romantic relationships, as well as one of its most thrilling movement segments. Rowan is seated on the pier amidst the slurping sounds of the seaside and the distant strains of a carrousel. Staring blankly ahead as always, he is repeating a series of small arm gestures when Eddie and Beth approach. In a scorching enactment of objectification, Eddie reintroduces Beth, blathering about his fondness for her breasts, her high-heeled splendor, her gorgeous legs, and, in a particularly telling statement, her massive crown of blonde hair—a feature which the decidedly brunette Beth does not possess. Struggling to overlook her new beau's shortcomings, Beth ekes out a demure smile but shows increasing signs of strain as Eddie displays her like a monkey-grinder, touting her dancing tricks while undercutting her demonstration, and inviting her to tell a favorite joke only to repeatedly interrupt it, finally upstaging the punch line. Rowan, mildly bewildered, leaves the couple for the solace of

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a secluded parking lot, where he plops his boombox onto the gravel and returns once again to his peculiar gestures, accompanying himself with the voice of Cher, crooning "Do You Believe in Love (after Love)?" He draws his wrists in and shakes them as if whisking water from his hands, pulls his fists to his face, knocking gently against his temples, cantilevers one arm back and forth in a horizontal, chest-level pointing motion. These gestures, discrete, contained, and close to the body, slowly expand, spreading to the arms and hips, erupting into spins and jumps, and eventually infecting his entire body, giving way to a rapturous smile as he lip-synchs the song and takes over the small, industrial space with sinuous, dazzling dancing.

Though it is difficult to relinquish this ecstatic passage, Kareena, the hula-hoop dancer, now slithers into Rowan's space (see Figure 2). One glossy ring a-twirl in each hand, she casts an unmistakable spell on Rowan, who instantly drops his own dance to dive deftly in through her rotating spheres, draping his uninvited torso around hers, burrowing his nose into her neck like a rescued puppy. In the process, it is as if they have exchanged giant rings: without a single break in spinning, Rowan relieves her of one of her revolving hoops, then returns it as she slinks away with a mild smirk, leaving him astonished and alone.

The camera cuts to David, also alone on the lawn in front of his apartment building. Here Newson makes his sharpest statement about the infectious power of surveillance in a scene that constitutes the flip-side of David's earlier flirtation with the camera. Seeming particularly small and vulnerable against the tall building behind him, David is approached by a towering figure armed obtrusively with a video camera, who corners and badgers him with an inventory of highly personal insinuations about his infirmity and related bodily functions: "What happened to your legs? Were you born like that, or did you have them chopped off? Do you have an ass-hole? How do you go to the toilet? Can you masturbate?" Newson moves from his own camera lens into the lens through which the inquisitor stalks David, thus providing both an intimate sense of the camera's objectifying gaze and then backing out to reveal the larger frame, the interloper dropping to his knees to keep the agitated David at close range. The intruder departs as arbitrarily as he entered, and another unforgettable moment of dancing constitutes a response: to the tune of a klezmer-inspired waltz, David begins to sway from one arm to the other and is suddenly backed up by a chorus of dancers who rise up like a herd of docile buffalo over the crest of the grassy slope, following his lead (see Figure 3). Like David, they hover close to the ground, dancing almost entirely on their arms. Though these dancers

Figure 2. Kareena Oates. Photo from the film The Cost of Living. *Used by permission of Leila Darwish, DV8 Physical Theatre.*

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Figure 3. David Toole, Tanja Liedtke, and Jose Maria Alves. Photo from the film The Cost of Living. *Used by permission of Leila Darwish, DV8 Physical Theatre.*

have legs, they are rubbery and limp, flailing behind them, ankles pliant and formless as they barely graze the lawn, propelled by the swinging momentum of their pelvises. The camera moves in on their collapsing knees, their distorted, useless-looking feet, and on the rocking, extended forearms that have already become David's signature means of locomotion. Newson thus surrounds David with reinforcements, deploying this dance to contend that we are more alike than different; in fact, David may have a few moves to teach the rest of us.

As in an earlier scene in which Beth and her dancing friend disappear just as David and Eddie attempt to join them, the hillside dancers vanish as suddenly as they had appeared, and we are left to wonder if they are only a fantasy conjured from the depths of David's loneliness. This pattern of disappearance recurs as David and Eddie peer through foggy windows at a ballet class. Dismounting from his wheelchair, David enters the studio and ambles among a jungle of lower extremities at the barre. As the legs tendu and glissade toward and away from the wall, David negotiates his way beneath them. Newson aptly angles the camera here so that this time it is only the lower halves of these bodies that are framed, raising questions about wholeness and the nature of disfigurement: Is it David who is deformed, whose agile body expertly navigates a path through the spear-like legs of the dancers, or are their culturally sanctioned but hyper-extended limbs the anomaly, arrow-straight and odd-looking, performing movements that have no clear or immediate purpose? Ultimately, David engages one of the ballerinas in a beautiful, rolling pas de deux in the center of the floor, and the two slide, ride, duck beneath, and pull one another along the studio's surface. Like the other vanishing vignettes before it, this segment ends abruptly and ambiguously, without development and an ambiguous sense of closure.

In the final moments of the film, a swollen sun sinks through cotton candy skies above the resort. Sea gulls coo and hover above the pier as the sultry Kareena expertly maneuvers her hoop while oiling her skin beneath the lusty gazes and catcalls of a trio of virile-looking young men. The group's intentions turn menacing as they begin to surround her, licking their lips, and she appears to play along at first, beckoning them in for a closer look.

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Then, in a single instant, she transforms her hoop into a fiercely whirling, circular scythe, scattering the threesome out of the picture and landing calmly on her feet directly at Rowan's waiting side. The couple strolls off into the sunset, exchanging twirling bands back and forth, oblivious as they pass Eddie and David sitting along the boardwalk.

Everything reads in the aesthetic economy of this film, and most elements read recursively. There are neighborhood bars and ballet barres, the revolving spheres of the wheelchair and Kareena's revolving hoops that alternately connote armor, betrothal, lure, and trap. Themes such as voyeurism loop back upon themselves from multiple perspectives: Eddie's opening question "Are we being watched?" foreshadows David's flirtation with and victimization by the camera, also frames the men's outsider status as they gawk, moments later, through the windows of the ballet studio. Vanishing becomes both a cinematic transition and narrative theme, suggestive of truncated dreams. Life as carnival also recurs thematically, from the underpaid clowns to the edgy, calliope-based music, to Eddie and David's attempts to turn a profit through freak-show stunts. Physical ideas also recur: the various head dances, from the regimented clown-faces to Eddie's fierce head-bobbing inside the bar, to an intricate and subtle dance of glances among Eddie, Beth, and another woman that constitute a miniature head-dance of longing and betrayal. David's invitingly prone posture during his soliloquy atop the bar becomes a maneuver of escape when the camera man pursues him; his final ride on Eddie's back is reminiscent of his studio duet with the ballerina.

Among the work's other accomplishments is the fact that Newson repeatedly engages metaphors that work both literally and figuratively. The body is frequently framed so that only half is visible: here the legs, there the torso. The masks are costumes but also separate their wearers from authentic engagement with their surroundings; the bottom rung exists both as prop and as metaphor for the social ranking of the disabled; the camera intrudes but also frames and records; the hoops are instruments for performance as well as rings, weapons, and snares. In one scene, Rowan literally "jumps through hoops" in pursuit of his lady-love. Skipping down an incline with the seaside behind him, he hops buoyantly through one red-and-white-striped hoop, only to come face to face again with the girl of his dreams; by now, she has accumulated a trio of spinning hoops, transferring them effortlessly from waist to neck, while leading Rowan along to the next point in their journey.

Most impressive is that the dancing constitutes the bold mainstay of this narrative work. Movement assumes its place alongside dialogue, costume, and setting to convey characterization and carry the bulk of the film's meaning. Without their dances, we would not know that Rowan has negotiated the distance from containment to joy, for example, or that Kareena has beckoned and then vanquished a group of would-be predators; nor would we have any notion at all about the relationship between Rowan and Kareena, or Beth and Eddie. Without the dancing ensemble behind David on the hillside, we would not comprehend the depth of his longing for support and recognition. After digesting this film, it is the dances that remain as aftertaste, and upon repeated viewings I find that I look forward to them individually, as to the return of a favorite character.

Following a pattern established in his earlier works, *Dead Dreams of Monochrome Men* (1990) and *Enter Achilles* (1995), relationships do not fare well in Newson's *lebenswelt:* the film is rife with commentary about the high cost of living and the hazards of human connection. If Newson casts an accusing glance

at heterosexual behaviors, for example, the gay world fares no better. Eddie makes no secret of his disdain for the hypocrisy of his closeted acquaintances; for example, in one scene Newson frames a trio of shadowy figures in a dance of "gents" as they head inside a seedy public restroom, seeking covert pleasure. Like Eddie himself, Newson takes on all comers—exposing duplicity, holding a critical mirror to social conventions, to desire, to the hegemony of scopic systems, to the predatory nature of employment and the multiple complexities of relationship. In the end, however, there is hope in the few friendships that endure, including the central one between Eddie and David. Against the gentle waters that rinse onto the saffron shores of the deserted resort, the two men relax side by side in a pair of beach chairs, then rise to form a final, profound image. Eddie takes to all fours, hoisting David upon his back, and they lumber along together with casual talk of future plans as their profiles combine to fashion the shape of one whole man from two truncated selves.

Candace Feck
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Reconstructing Weidman: A Dancer's Perspective

Biography

Charles Weidman wrote the following biography and used it for promotional purposes while directing Expression of Two Arts Theatre and subsequently Charles Weidman and His Theatre Dance Company from 1960 until his death in 1975. The original spelling and syntax have been maintained. Weidman's infamous wit and whimsy are evident and unmistakable even here:

> Born in Lincoln, Nebraska. His father was Chief of the fire department there, and later Chief of all fire departments in the Canal Zone during its building. His mother (from Sioux City Iowa) was, at one time, champion roller skater of the middle west. In Lincoln, he studied with Eleanor Frampton (who later represented Humphrey-Weidman dance at the Cleveland Institute for Music in Cleveland Ohio).
>
> In 1920, he left for Los Angeles to study at Denishawn (school of Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn). His first teacher there was Doris Humphrey. Martha Graham (who he did not meet at the time) was rehearsing a Taltic Ballet of Ted Shawn's—"Xochitl." He didn't finish his summer course because the leading male dancer (Robert Gorham) had an accident and Weidman was sent up to Tacoma, Wash., to replace him.
>
> Was with Denishawn for eight years touring this country, England, and a year and a half in the Orient.
>
> Among successful dances at that time were "The Crapshooter" (solo), "Dance American" (solo), and "Dance Arabe," a duet with Martha Graham.
>
> In 1929, with Doris Humphrey, established their own school and the Humphrey-Weidman Concert Company. Many famous moderns were part of that company—Such as Jose Limon, Jack Cole, Sybil Shearer, Eleanor King, Katherine Litz, Harriette Ann Gray, Ann Halpern, Frank Westbrook, and others.
>
> In 1948, due to Doris Humphrey's retirement as a dancer, he formed his own company. Using narration, he called it "Theatre Dance." Of his dancers and students are Bob Fosse, Toni Charmoli, Lee Sherman, Emily Frankel and Mark Ryder, Peter Hamilton, Marge Champion, Melissa Hayden and others.
>
> And he has worked with Mia Slavenska, Leon Danielian, Viola Essen, Alicia Nikitina, and others.
>
> Besides the concert work and tours, he

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