

## **Fluency, Recollections: a Testimonial**

### **Peter Chin and María Constanza Guzmán**

*Fluency* is an interdisciplinary performance piece that deals with questions of language, identity, dance and translation. It revolves around a question that Jamaican-Canadian dancer and choreographer Peter Chin used as a premise. Can one become Nicaraguan? More broadly, can one become an Other? *Fluency* sought to address this question. Over a two-year period, Peter Chin traveled to Nicaragua with the “utopian mission” of transforming himself into a Nicaraguan, partly through learning the Spanish language. Chin translated his failures and successes in Nicaragua, and in learning Spanish, into a kinetic language, and his improvisations were videotaped so they could be “retranslated” by dancer Alison Denham. The dance-narration was structured as a faux talk show, led by actor Billy Marchenski, with translation scholar María Constanza Guzmán as an invited “guest specialist” who commented on director-choreographer-performer Chin’s “social experiment” and Denham’s retranslated movements.

*Fluency* was created between 2010 and 2011 and was performed in Toronto in November of 2011. This testimonial, written for *Tusaaji*, includes Chin’s and Guzmán’s memories of and reflections on the creation process. It is accompanied by three *Fluency* video clips relevant to the questions they are addressing in their comments.

### **Comments on the lecture-style part of *Fluency* about Chin’s Nicaragua experience**



**P. Chin:** The idea of having an academic analyze and comment on my Nicaraguan “social experiment” came about partly from a sense of mischief and also because I was genuinely interested in what an academic from Latin America would have to say about it. As an artist, and in particular, a body artist, I am interested in the kinds of truth that could be expressed through dance, which comes from a different realm from that which finds its expression in the arrangement of words and their meanings. At the same time, I was drawn to words and meanings that come from creative scholarship.

I was delighted and completely engaged when I began discussing my ideas with María Constanza, as we found many points on which we connected. Through those initial discussions with her, it quickly became apparent that my thinking around “becoming Nicaraguan” as the premise for a dance-theatre piece was very much allied to the field of translation and linguistics. From what she brought to the discourse during the creation of *Fluency*, most striking and salient for me were the notions that “translation means regulated transformation” and attendant that “cultural contact is an ongoing process of becoming.” As a dance/theatre artist, I have always held transformation as a fundamental guiding principle, even in a shamanistic sense, where a performative act offers a real opportunity, to me and to witnesses of that act, of

transformation and transcendence. The explicit intention of engaging with ritual transformation, beyond theatrical representationalism, for me as an artist and a human being, was certainly a path towards “the process of becoming” or, put another way, of knowing who/what I am.

I was very excited by María Constanza’s willingness to enter into a performative endeavor, utilizing her own ideas, shaped by me in collaboration with her. This process itself, of negotiation between two streams of practice, with both shared commonalities as well as divergent ways of thinking and being, guided by openness to one another through empathy, mirrored beautifully the themes of *Fluency* itself. That is why both as an artist researching in Nicaragua, and as an artist in the studio collaborating with other people, I have always believed it important to be porous to the influences around me, and to allow unexpected ideas and information to come into the process, by seeing the value of them and having a desire to be granted insight into what it is to be someone else.

**M. C. Guzmán:** *Fluency* was a piece about an experiment and it was an experiment for many of us, on many levels. It was probably an experiment for Peter but it was certainly an experiment for me. I am an academic, and here I was, participating in an interdisciplinary performance piece in which, moreover, I was invited to participate not by becoming something or someone else, but by continuing to be an academic, only on the stage. Billy, Alison and Peter are experienced performance artists; I am not, so participating in *Fluency* was an enormous challenge for me. Through an open process of creation, Peter led us with expert and subtle, almost invisible hands, and we felt confident and comfortable that we were pursuing an idea together although we didn’t really know how we were being led. Following this path we ended up creating characters out of our own selves: I created a character that had my name, that in a way was me. But what was I? Who am I as I embark on this experiment? Can I be solely an academic, in the most monolithic, one-dimensional sense of the term? The piece is, to a significant extent, about identity. Early in the making of *Fluency* it became clear to me, as I talked to Peter, that as the character, or the subject in the piece, is constructed as embodied, that character cannot be “solely” about one thing or another. I certainly did not want to construct it unidimensionally. I am not only an academic, I am also a woman. And I am a Colombian. In Canada I am an immigrant, and English is my second language; I cannot claim that one aspect of this identity defines me more fully than the others. And yet, there was a significant reason why Peter wanted to have “an academic” in the piece, to see how that would work, that was very important. In that search, in the process, there was a constant tension, as we wanted really to pursue the question of cultural translation conceptually, to see how it played out in relation to the experience of Peter wanting to “become” a Nicaraguan, and at the same time to put the “academic” to the test, take “it” out of its frame and see how and whether it, its discourse, would converse with the language of dance, of the body.

*Fluency* brings together various discursive spaces—of academia, of the media, and of dance and performance—and in doing so it problematizes them. This helps construct mirror images that serve as a form of cross-examination, bringing to the fore various—at times disparate—contexts and methods. Is there

common ground between these discursive spaces? A critique of academic discourse was built into the piece as a result, just as critiques of media discourse—as seen on TV talk shows—and of normative discourses in general—of dance, of language—were built into the piece as well. Given our variegated backgrounds and experiences, during the creation process we lived in and through the resulting tensions, navigated through them, and I think they emerged in the piece in interesting ways, through language and also through irony, misunderstanding, and moments of contact and relation and the anxieties associated with them. The transformative power of *Fluency* lies precisely at the heart of those tensions.

### Comments on the productive tensions emerging from the use of diverse modes of delivering information in *Fluency*



**P. Chin:** The choice of the talk-show format came from various impulses and interests. As a means of publicly “talking about dance” for a dancer, the usual format is the post-show Q & A, where suddenly the dancers you just saw on stage in what was perhaps a transformative experience—where the usual precepts of “reality” are suspended by mutual agreement between performers and audience—are now sitting in front of you, being asked questions, and in a casual way, explaining how what had happened on stage came to be. This unmasking of something often ineffable intrigued me for its odd yet usefully accessible nature. Also, the popular TV talk-show format that we are collectively familiar with is certainly a place where truth-seeking, the testimonial, the confession, showmanship, and “edutainment” all collide. It is left to us to sort through it all to work out what simultaneous realities are at play. This appealed to me as a mischievous way of sharing my personal story in *Fluency* while at the same time allowing other voices to give testimonials. By opening and exposing the creative *modus operandi* this way, I deliberately put myself through a creative and personal trial, intently raising my artistic stakes. Of course, this co-relates to my opening and exposing myself to the phenomena of Nicaragua and the Spanish language in my process of “becoming Nicaraguan”.

As a theatre artist, it was difficult for me to deal with dramatically different kinds of delivery systems for the ideas I wanted to put out there, and then have these modes work together in the same moment. For instance, I am mostly dancing as a way of communication and being present on stage, trusting a stream-of-consciousness spontaneity, whereas Billy Marchenski (as the talk-show host) is speaking and analyzing based on a prescribed line of thinking, evincing a well-rehearsed body language that is about showmanship. It's a strange “conversation” to be sure. Billy and I are further at odds because I am a believer based on direct personal experience whereas Billy is a sometimes derisive skeptic armed with rational analysis. Also, as I look at the video, I think that I am like a shaman, connecting and mediating different realms, which in its own way, is like what a translator does. One of my favorite moments in the work is when Billy seems to “get it”, understanding the social experiment of becoming Nicaraguan as part of a larger movement towards cultivating empathy that will heal fractures between people, species and Nature.

One of the things that were hard for me was actually putting myself through some pointed cross-examination on stage regarding my ideas about

Nicaragua. Billy asks me if I am a dilettante and a collector of foreign cultures because of my aspiration to become a member of a culture to which I don't belong. Indeed, this might well be asked of me, and certainly the premise of "becoming Nicaraguan" was intended to be a little outrageous and provocative, and could be read in several different ways, some easier to accept than others. I thought that creating this tension between modes of expression would be a good catalyst for revealing the deeper proposals beyond the surface that I wanted to explore.

In a way, Billy became an embodiment of some of the nagging questions and doubts that I experienced in researching and creating this work, where status-quo systems and conventional ways of thinking around me and within me were telling me that it was politically incorrect or unrealistic to propose this goal of "becoming Nicaraguan". Ultimately, I think that this self-imposed trial led to some important insights for me that I didn't have at the beginning of the process, and in this way, the whole enterprise has been a transformation and an important phase in the ongoing process of becoming for me.

Writing this makes me connect with what María Constanza wrote above about "creating characters out of our own selves," when she goes on to say, "I created a character that had my name, that in a way was me. But what was I? Who am I as I embark on this experiment?" When I was on stage, I was being myself and bringing my particular experiences into the composition called *Fluency*, but I was also inhabiting a certain "character" through whom I felt it was safe to expose myself to a kind of public examination that would hopefully lead to valuable insights that would be more universal.

**M. C. Guzmán:** The format of the talk show was, I thought, a great way to reference power struggles through language and across discourses. The language of the media, its format, seeks and requires resolution, answers in recognizable codes, and *Fluency* is precisely about opacity and the incommensurability of experience, of rendering experience through language in its entirety. The interaction between Billy (the talk-show host) and Peter is one of the parts in which I think the concept and some of the discussions we had throughout the creation process about the limits of language were presented the most profoundly. It is an unfolding conversation, but the languages don't meet. However, this failure to meet is not related to language in its materiality but to its politics, to specific investments and ideological structures clashing. There may be many ways of understanding Peter's dance-response to Billy, but one I can see is the difficulty of articulating verbally the experience of cultural contact as an embodied experience, the difficulty of capturing it in language. And also the inability of a specific "structure"—in this case, the media structure, representing common sense, normative and logocentric discourse, dominant narratives of culture and nation—to listen. But is Billy himself ultimately "listening"? Is he, or is any part of his self, able to listen? Does he "end up" listening or is this attempt at dialogue doomed to failure? These are the kinds of questions *Fluency* raises. It touches on ethics as well.

## Comments on the simultaneity and merging of multiple modes of delivering/processing information in *Fluency*



**P. Chin:** In hindsight, I think that this section, in which Billy, María Constanza, Alison, and I, on video in Granada, Nicaragua, meet on stage, is really about the substantiveness of “process”. It’s striking to me that what ended up on stage, as María Constanza suggests as well, is a distilled version of what actually happened in the process of investigation and creation in the studio between us cast members working out together what the issues in *Fluency* meant to us. I have for a long time honored the magic, discovery and great pleasure involved in the process of creation, and often wished that the audience could share in that somehow. By putting a ritualized version of our studio process on stage, I think that I have continued to honor the potency that I recognize in it, and have elevated “process” to a place that we conventionally reserve for something that we deem polished, finished, absolute or definitive. In contrast, the values that I celebrated in *Fluency’s* collective process were the sense of unfolding discovery, the worthiness of uncertainty, the evolving space for discussion and expression of difference, constructive negotiation, and the opportunity to understand another’s point of view, or even to take on another’s point of view. Clearly, openness, spontaneity and adaptability were crucial qualities that we brought to our process in the studio in order to enrich this endeavor.

In this convergent moment, we all seem to be in uncharted, changing waters, relying on our spontaneity, openness and adaptability in order to make sense of the ideas that we are attempting to understand collectively, each from our particular points of view, experience, knowledge and discipline. I like that there is a meeting of analytical thinking and intuitive rumination, and that together, they don’t cancel each other out, but create something richer. Even Billy is moving towards some kind of different state of knowing for him, based on his mysterious, gut-attraction to Alison and her dancing. Billy’s disposition here is analogous to my condition on the video in Nicaragua, through my dancing, trying to feel and understand what my attraction to Nicaragua was, and why I wanted to be together with whatever that was.

Personally, I am happy with the way this episode turned out. I think it is funny, but another reason is that I can detect the principles of “linguistic translation” and those of my valued “creative process” travelling on such interesting parallel and intersecting tracks. Translation as an ongoing process, or regulated transformation, something that inhabits the realms of changefulness, uncertainty, and non-absolutes, really sounds like elements of my creative process that I cherish so much.

**M. C. Guzmán:** While working on this part of the piece in the studio, Alison and I had conversations where I felt we were really trying to learn from each other. After having introduced ideas about translation as something beyond mere linguistic transfer, I wanted to hear what Ali had to say. I wanted to know whether she, as a dancer, saw a relationship between dance and these ideas about translation I was positing, whether that made any sense to her as a dancer, or whether she did not relate. I wanted to learn from her, from the dancer’s experience. It fascinated me; I truly didn’t know what those answers

would be. I am not a dancer. It is also interesting that, as a dancer, she is not necessarily used to articulating her practice, putting it into words. So we had to find a way to talk about this; we spoke of it openly, considering our questions and hesitations. We tried to find a language to understand each other. When we talked about language and dance, or the similarities between dance and learning languages, I was surprised by the extent to which there is, in the lingo of dance, elements of “structure”, “form” and other aspects that are analogous to notions we use in talking about language, and even writing. I remember Ali also suggested a way of talking about “accent” in dance, which was, to me, intriguing. Throughout the process of creation it became apparent to me that this was going to be the part of *Fluency* where my academic self would dissolve, or fuse into a different body, that of the piece, of the other performers, of my own body, in a new way, and dance would lead the way. As a non-dancer I felt vulnerable, afraid but willing to be in that space. It was, on the one hand, a chance to translate the “theory” into the language of the performance, to embody it and transform it into movement. I had never done that before, at least not consciously. It was an opportunity to do something I’m not trained to do and which is not part of my self-definition. I was, as Peter puts it, in “uncharted, changing waters”. Doing this required a considerable degree of trust, for me to believe that they would show me the way. Peter, Alison, Billy, and I were together in this, and I trusted them. Plus, I feel that Ali and I reached a level of empathy and found a way to communicate, which helped me to be able to see my body and push myself. All this helped me go into the unfamiliar space and expose myself to that estrangement, displaced from the spaces and forms of embodiment with which I am more comfortable and which I normally inhabit. That estrangement was also what I desired and looked forward to the most, and one of the most important gifts the piece offered me. As for the relationship between this part and the rest of the piece, I felt in a way that the experience was analogous to that of Peter wanting to become a Nicaraguan. Like him, I was moving into being what I am not. And I saw this happen in the piece in various ways. When Ali is dancing on the basis of Peter’s spontaneous creation in the video, which stands for the “original” of the dance, you can see her inability and anxiety as she tries to “copy” the dance identically (from the video, as she watches it) and fails. I think Peter and Ali found a brilliant way to represent in dance the translator’s psyche. More generally, this productive, generative anxiety is also present in unfamiliar situations of cultural contact, such as the ones Peter sought to reflect upon.

In closing, I would add that this part completed the richness of *Fluency*, for me, personally, for the piece as a whole allowed me, among many other things, to look for ways to express ideas in embodied form and to see how that unfolds in creating a piece intended for performance.