

Introduction

CONTINUITY IN DANCE must be worked at. The minute you relax your efforts at preserving something you start to lose it. There's no such thing as setting aside an idea or a style or a work for a while and then expecting it to be intact when you come back to it later.

This is also true of a dancer's body and of a critic's memory. Preservation — or the losing battle we fight with it — may in fact be the basic issue of American dance. The immediacy and the ephemerality of dance are its most particular qualities — they are the reason for dance's appeal as well as its low rank on the scale of intellectual values. People are thrilled by it because it is so singular an occurrence. When you have seen a dance, you've done something no one else will do again. But for this very reason scholars can't get hold of it. Dance leaves them with nothing tangible to analyze or categorize or put on reserve in the library.

In some way that isn't entirely perverse, dancers appreciate their own elusiveness in the culture. Their attitude toward filming their work is one of mistrust, and beneath their toleration for critics lies an unarticulated hostility. I often feel dancers would rather not have us see deeply into their work or meditate on its implications. They prefer to remain inaccessible to scholarly analysis, to exclude themselves from the normal processes of historical evaluation. They do what they do for their time, and their achievement is somehow exempt from being downgraded or superseded by later developments. If a dance makes a good impression, that impression tends to remain, and even to grow more splendid, in the minds of those who saw it. No one can go back and ask whether the impression was a mistake, or whether someone's success was due to a lack of sophis-

tication in the audience or to any of a dozen magical accidents that happen in the theater. But we have no way, either, to review and strengthen our perception of things whose significance originally escaped us. No one can unravel or debunk the myth of Isadora Duncan or Ruth St. Denis or Nijinsky. Myths those dancers will remain, becoming more and more ethereal as the eyewitnesses to their work disappear. Nor do we really want to topple these gods, but we lack the means to consider their work for ourselves.

American dance is essentially without a history. Besides a written history, it also lacks anything except the most rudimentary and selective sense of its own past. For the first time, in the 1970s we are beginning to see a fairly widespread interest in the choreography of the early modern dancers. But the revivals being done are already watered down, taught by second- and third-generation dancers or even by notators who have never seen the dances at all. The audience is required to depend on steps alone and on our contemporaries' interpretations; we are asking the post-McLuhan generation to reveal the 1930s and 1940s to us. It's unreasonable, and it really doesn't work.

So the creative distinction of a Doris Humphrey — or even of a José Limón, who lived fifteen years longer — escapes us even though their contemporaries assure us of their importance. We try to be happy with a pale image of a Doris Humphrey work because that is the only image before us. We develop a callousness toward the simplest devices of history: documentation, attribution, the identification of sources and the establishment of background. We're used to seeing old works revived without benefit of program notes about their context or even their vital statistics. We are seldom told who was responsible for casting, teaching and rehearsing a revival, let alone by what method the choreography was reconstructed. Anyone who undertakes to establish what an old dance was steps on shaky ground — but we all attempt it in our own ways. We must.

For almost three quarters of a century in American dance, the most intense, individual pursuit of dance expression has been going on, an almost prodigal invention that often has spent itself leaving no real relics — generations teaching themselves to make it all new, only to be absorbed into later generations. The security and status that have benefited European dancers have thrown them into an almost complete paralysis of choreographic imagination, but the

perilous existence that keeps American dancers outsiders has kept them free. They haven't had to please anyone, repeat their past successes, reinforce societal norms, or refrain from shocking people. They have been free to dance as they saw fit to dance. Since Western society has not come up with a way to have both security *and* creativity for artists, I prefer the way we've had it.

A critic of dance is in some ways a self-appointed historian. None of the documentary devices presently in use is as accessible, as highly developed, or as reliable as good on-the-spot dance criticism. The qualities of dance that make it so resistant to the conventional means of recovery are the ones that are the most intriguing to its critics. What many of us try to do is capture some essence of the dance; our writing is directed toward this rather than to the more cool and Olympian certitudes of critics in the other arts. For us, immediacy and accuracy of observation rank absurdly high, both in what we hope to achieve in our own work and in what we value in the work of others.

I began this book because of a desperate and continuing sense that not enough was being done to impede the extinction of yesterday's dance. Leaving so few and inadequate artifacts behind, dance is always in a way reinventing itself. It doesn't stay around long enough to become respectable or respected. Its ephemerality is mistaken for triviality. Because it is inherently always new, it's considered not to be profound.

I wanted to look at a wider range of dances than is usually available to be surveyed and see if I could uncover some of the sources of greatness by understanding what those dances were. I didn't start with any overall theories to prove, and I don't think I've found any explanations on which I can hang everything. Many forces, many influences, have been at work; if I found themes, they are the themes of America itself: diversity, independence, the lack of social stratification or any inviolable tradition, and an unapologetic openness to what in a more refined, less interesting society would be considered earthy or common or even coarse.

In trying to determine what makes American dance American, I decided not to observe the conventional ways of grouping dances. It seemed to me that dividing them up by choreographers, or following a strictly chronological sequence, or separating the world into "ballet" and "modern" would be just as artificial a way to ac-

count for what happened as looking across the board at how our major themes and forms got started. Even when ballet and modern dancers were angrily closed off from each other, their work represented a response, an argument, a refutation of what the other stood for. Now that the two "schools" have eased hostilities, we can see that they even had some things in common all along, and I thought that if I could find out what some of those things were, I might get at the American quality that underlies them both.

I think there are two basic approaches to stage dancing — the academic and the expressive. Academic dance is dedicated to the preservation of a style, a code of manners, a representation of society and art. Its appeal comes from its familiarity, its recognizability, and even its predictability. The audience goes to academic dance to be regaled with its own excellence, to be reminded of the world's perfectability even in imperfect times. And, of course, the audience is limited to those who can understand the language of academic dance and applaud its message. Most European stage dancing is academic, as are the court dances of the East and, probably, the ancient Greek rituals.

In expressive dance the style is only one of several possible means to state one's idea. The dance may want to tear down the society it comes from or endorse that society, but in any case it makes its endorsement or its protest without concern for proprieties. Its audience is looking for revelation of some kind, not reassurance. Most American dance has been expressive in the sense that it has been looking for new forms to express ideas or modifying the old forms when they stand in the way of ideas. And ideas can include visual, musical, kinetic, and other nonverbal concepts as well as intellectual ones. The European-born ballet choreographers who have contributed most to our dance were experimentalists, not fully successful or comfortable in their native ballet environments — Antony Tudor and George Balanchine are notable examples. And academically minded Americans like Glen Tetley, John Butler, Robert Cohan and John Neumeier have gravitated to Europe, where stability and formality are more highly prized. The more traditional influences from abroad (Massein, Ashton) have remained quite self-contained here, not inspiring new developments but instead adding to our raw materials in a general way.

I realize it is dangerous to categorize so broadly, and I hope the reader will think of this distinction as flexibly as it has been made.

Academic dance is often expressive, and expressive dance often uses the academic language. Alongside the most individualistic developments there has always been a popular European strain here, but even this has taken on a different kind of energy in its American interpretations.

I would also note that what survives is what has been best preserved, and when an effort at preservation is made, the prospects for survival increase. We know most about the academic dance of history because its business is to stay in business. The expressive dance only lives through the tradition of a continuous society, whether that is a tribe of Pacific islanders or a modern dance company. For all I know, there may have been a strong expressive strain in European choreography at one time, but it is not evident today except for those remnants of the relatively recent Central European modern dance that survived World War II.

Not only did American dancers not have much respect for academies, the ones they finally developed were identified with individuals rather than with anonymous traditions. "Classical ballet" or "modern dance" is part of every dancer's education, but there is no classical or modern school that constitutes a passport to success in the professional world, as for instance graduation from the Kirov or Bolshoi schools does for a Russian dancer. Our key schools are oriented to specific styles and lead the student to companies associated with those styles, like George Balanchine's School of American Ballet and New York City Ballet, Martha Graham's school and company. Usually the dancer has to undergo a transitional period with further specific training in order to enter a company outside his original orbit.

If the training of dancers has not become institutionalized, neither has the organization of performing companies themselves. Not until the mid-1960s did any dance company attain even quasi-public status, and this via financial subsidies that must be renewed from one year to the next. Official support for dance is only as permanent as this year's season; it can be withdrawn and funds cut in a poor budget year. The corporate identity of dance companies rests on the individual founders or directors of the companies rather than on any governmental unit. The existence of almost every one of our major dance organizations, including the repertory and the jobs of the dancers, has at some time been gravely threatened by the illness or death of one of its directors. I suspect a European would be puz-

zled by this. Characteristically, though, our companies seem to prefer it that way. A young choreographer in America invariably feels he must leave his home company and found his own group rather than mature under its wing. Since 1964 American dance has become noticeably more public, more "commercial," more stable and safe — and less independent and creative. It looks, almost everywhere, more and more like its European progenitors.

This book could not have been written without dancers, even though its main movers are choreographers, and I thank them for continuing to create the choreographers' visions for us. If there are too few dancers mentioned by name here, it's only because choreography must be able to outlast dancers in order for us to have a history. By this I do not mean that dancers and choreography can be separated. That the choreographies in this book will "live" somewhere, in some definite form, eternally. Or that, if they do live, the dances in this book and no others constitute the history of American choreography in the first three quarters of the twentieth century.

The works I chose to include — or to leave out — were selected only partly through a judicious screening of those seventy-five years of achievement. Some are undeniable landmarks, but epochal works like *Primitive Mysteries* and *Serenade* are so rare they cannot constitute a history by themselves. Many important works I have never seen, like Hanya Holm's *Trend*, or anything of Holm's work before she turned her creative hand entirely to musicals. Many that should be included are no longer in repertory, like Paul Taylor's *Scudorama*, and I wanted only works that I could study fresh for this book.

I've noticed that what I remember about a striking performance is impressionistic, and that I seldom retain enough specific information to back up my impressions or to give me any new thoughts about the work. So all the dances treated in detail here I have seen live at some time and have studied either live or on film during the writing of this book, and I've tried to indicate exactly which performances form the basis of my analysis. If no specific film or performance is referred to, the source can be assumed to be live performances by the dance's "home" company during the seasons 1974-75, 1975-76 and 1976-77. My second series of thanks goes to the managements and press representatives of those companies,

who gave me the opportunity to see performances repeatedly with no immediate prospect of reviews, and to all the custodians of film and videotape who made it possible for me to view and make notes on those documents.

Even this outline of my sources will not satisfy the most rigorous requirements of historical research. The fact is that there really is no absolute form of a dance. Not only does a dance change subtly with different casts and in different theaters, but choreography undergoes a constant metamorphic process from the time it's made. Steps and designs change little by little, interpretations grow sharper or fuzzier, things get forgotten or inadvertently added, and — again *because* the dance is not a fixed, finished artifact — the choreographer who has second thoughts can change a dance from season to season in trying to improve it or adapt it to the resources at his or her disposal. The best a scholar can do with an old dance is to regard it in its present state and try to ascertain the source of its past or present greatness, taking into account whatever changes we're aware of. One "reads in" a style if it's not there and is supposed to be. In some cases I've compared past and present versions because to describe only the original would mislead people who've seen only current, greatly changed interpretations.

Nor is there any absolute way to describe a dance. Each critic and each member of the audience sees, feels and rationalizes a dance according to a highly individual complex of skills and sensibilities. I am "objective" only insofar as my eyes will allow me to be. Someone else could look at the same ballets and could describe and analyze them in a completely different way. In fact, I hope many more studies in this area will be made.

My discussion of these dances comes from an actual consideration of the dances as I saw them; I have made very little reference to the observations of other critics, since they can be read elsewhere. I have, however, drawn heavily on resources made available to me by many individuals and organizations. Most important of these is the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, which granted me a fellowship to begin the work. For other materials and support I would like to thank the American Dance Festival, Sharon Bouck, Lucia Chase and Daryl Dodson of American Ballet Theater, Selma Jeanne Cohen, Merce Cunningham and the Cunningham Dance Foundation, the staff of the Dance Collection at the Library and Museum of Performing Arts in Lincoln Center, the Dance Nota-

tion Bureau, Jim D'Anna, Agnes de Mille, Jeff Duncan, Stella Giammassi and Harry Forbes at WNET/Channel 13, Martha Hill, Elizabeth Kagan, Linda Kohl and the NYU Video Center, Lewis Lloyd, Frederick Morgan, Harry Rubenstein at New Dance Group, Jane Sherman, Ted Steeg Productions, Ernestine Stodelle, Greg Toning, Martha Wittman, and Shirley Wynne.

Andrew Mark Wentink, who assembled the illustrations, has produced a remarkable document of American styles both choreographic and photographic. I am very grateful for his contribution.

For the indefinable but most appreciated stimulus of their ideas, insights, arguments and enthusiasm I want to thank my friends and colleagues Arlene Croce, Cecily Dell, Senta Driver, Ann Fisk, Charles Fisk, Ellen Jacobs, Deborah Jowitt, John Mueller, Robert Pierce, Charles Scupine, Laura Shapiro, Suzanne Shelton, and Nathaniel Tileston. I am especially grateful to Robert Cornfield for his devoted guidance and understanding, to my editor at Houghton Mifflin, Jonathan Galassi, and to Dr. Richard Kavner for helping me to see.