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Two Views of Dance: Aesthetic Theory and Performance

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This version of the gallery guide is identical to the original version.

The problem of my paper concerns the role of the philosopher-aesthetician with respect to two particular groups: the arts public and the creative/performing artists, in particular with respect to the art of dance. The discussion necessarily concerns the goals and the methods for aesthetics, a subject recently addressed by John Fisher and Monroe Beardsley's editorial in the Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism (John Fisher and Monroe Beardsley, "Editorial," The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, XXXVIII, no. 3, Spring, 1980, 235-237).

My interest in this problem arose from practical considerations. Recently I was asked to develop a format to relate aesthetics to dance for a tour of performances with a dance company in the U.S.A. My task was to prepare a program for the general public that would apply aesthetics, a humanities discipline, to the understanding of dance performances. The touring project had two aspects: symposia and performances. It was necessary to include the aesthetics presentation in the actual performances. In my mind the unusual aspect of the project was the challenge of how to present aesthetics to a public audience in the context of a performance. The sponsors were open as to how the task might be accomplished. The project required reflecting on the questions of this paper: What is the role of the aesthetician with respect to the public and to the performing artists?

One problem that such a project faces derives from the history and tradition of the discipline of aesthetics. As it has been practiced over the centuries, aesthetics has been addressed primarily to its own practitioners. Aesthetics is written in the language of abstract generalizations and uses technical vocabulary uncommon to the public and to the practitioners of dance who necessarily give priority to developing languages of the body. Fisher and Beardsley have asserted that the major goal of writing in aesthetics is "theory," consisting of general statements about the arts (Fisher & Beardsley, p. 236). Corresponding to that goal are two principal methods, empirical-inductive and critical-analytic. The empirical-inductive method bases theoretical generalizations in aesthetics on detailed observations and analyses of the arts, while the critical-analytic method is concerned with such matters as examining and clarifying linguistic concepts and principles that constitute aesthetic theory. Various combinations of these methodological elements are used by those of us who write on aesthetic theory.

Since aesthetics, in recent times at least, has been written almost exclusively with the small circle of aestheticians in mind, the problem is, how to get out of the circle of aestheticians speaking to each other in ways that are essentially inaccessible to the public or to artists.

In order to prepare for the dance project referred to earlier, it was necessary to accommodate two distinct views of dance: those of theory and performance. Theory based on the results of the aestheticians' explorations had to be presented in language that would interest a

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public audience, and be understood. It was equally important to adapt the aesthetics presentation to the format of the performers so that it would not appear to be merely "tacked on". The solution was that the choreographer and I worked together. I produced a script outlining the themes, and he choreographed a piece for the dancers and me to do jointly, in which the aesthetician's words and the dancers' movements were coordinated.

The intent was to make the verbal aesthetics as much a part of the performance as possible. The process included rehearsals, during which I kept the same stage rules as the performers, and opportunities for informal interaction. This process enabled me to get a feel for the rhythm of preparing a performance and subsequently helped me to adapt the aesthetic ideas to the format of a performance. The result was to show how the insights of a philosopher-aesthetician can be presented in a theatrical context. (At that time I was at work on a source book of philosophical writings on dance. This background provided an overview of the various approaches that philosophers have taken to dance over the centuries.).

During the course of the presentation I spoke of the "humanities," and their relation to the arts. I said, for example, "In the broadest sense a humanities scholar, for example the philosopher-aesthetician, is a student of human culture. His tools are primarily critical reasoning, verbal analysis, and description, and he frequently finds that aesthetic values are his subject matter." I went on to explain that philosophers from Plato to the present have written about dance, and noted the growing interest of contemporary philosophers in the dance. I explained that philosophy allows one to put in abstract terms the things that are seen and provides categories of thought for understanding dance as an art, for seeing its relations to other human endeavors.

The term "choreography," which is a combination of two Greek words meaning "dance" and "writing," enabled me to suggest a link between two areas of dance performances and aesthetics. I noted, for example, that a choreographer who makes dances and a dancer who performs provide the subject matter for the aesthetician who then theorizes about the activity.

The concept of style which is a subject of considerable interest to aestheticians and to choreographers, suggested itself as a common ground for relating aesthetics to the dance. Style is not an unproblematic or simple concept, as recent writings and symposia in aesthetics have shown. Two prevalent notions of dance style are based on national and personal embellishments. There exists a tradition of dividing dances according to characteristics established by the practices originating in the different countries. In this respect Russian, English, Danish, and American dance companies are said to each have a different look.

Two conflicting views emerge with respect to national styles. The "look" of a particular "national" company suggests an overall quality that can be associated with the performance style of the company. On the other hand, Anna Kisselgoff, dance critic for the New York Times, argues that dancers from the same national companies, who have essentially the same training and cultural backgrounds exhibit considerable personal variation or "personal style" in their dancing. (New York Times, March 5, 1978)

Applying the term "style" to dance, Roderyk Lange remarks that a style results from the choices of the dancer in stressing some of the components of dance to a greater or lesser degree, and in arranging their proportional display accordingly. (Roderyk Lange, The Nature of Dance. London: Macdonald and Evans, 1975, p. 80) Arnold Berleant suggests a similar view of style: "In a dancer, style...represents... the distinctive grace, flair, or individual adaptation by which the dancer imbues the movement with his or her personality." (Arnold Berleant, unpublished correspondence, January 19, 1978) I call this approach to dance style the personal embellishment thesis. A variation of this thesis applies also to choreographers. A choreographer's style, says Berleant, consists in utilizing an already existing dance genre "in ways that reflect a distinct vision and personal sensibility, as expressed through typical combinations and patterns of movement." (Berleant, 1978)

Given the existence of national traditions and personal variations among individual choreographers and performers, it is necessary to consider further the matter of dance style. A third approach to style has been suggested by Pitrim Sorokin who proposed that style includes both an ideational element, which is only implicit in the visual appearance, and a visual sensate element which can be seen. (Pitrim Sorokin, Fluctuation of Forms of Art: Social and Cultural Dynamics I, New York: Bedminster Press, 1962, pp. 247, 248) These two aspects are intended to establish the conceptual and the attitudinal approaches to dancing. In theory Sorokin's view is sufficiently broad to encompass both national and individual variations that emerge within the traditions of Western ballet.

An adequate theory of style must encompass for example, the perceived uniformity of style in the performances of a national company such as Bournonville's Danish Ballet or The Royal Ballet, and, at the same time it must recognize the contributions of personal embellishment of choreographers and performers.

The problem of dance style is not simply a question of national or personal aspects, however. The New York City Ballet under the direction of George Balanchine has become a national ballet for the U.S.A., but its overall style is due primarily to the personal vision of a foreign-born choreographer. Moreover Martha Graham, a native American choreographer, has developed her personal vision into a style of dancing that transcends all national considerations. In each of these cases the personal embellishment thesis correctly points to a truth: creative individuals are frequently the dominant force in shaping the variations of dancing styles. But the primary consideration in understanding a style must be upon the images that are seen and the ideas and attitudes concerning dance that underlie these visible elements.

It is appropriate, therefore, to represent Bournonville's, Bejart's, Balanchine's, and Graham's contributions to the dance as distinct styles. Their respective repertoires of dances, collectively speaking, are different because they represent different ideas and attitudes toward the elements of movement--steps, gestures, structure and process, (See Suzanne Farrell's remarks on structure and process in David Daniel, "A Conversation with Suzanne Farrell," Ballet Review, vol. VII, no. 1, 1978-79, pp. 1-15) expression and dynamics, and subject matter. The style consists of the approach to these elements in conjunction with the choice of music, costume, and theater design. The choreographer's

work in creating dances out of these elements is sometimes referred to as a matter of "coping with constraints" and selecting from ever-changing positive resources. (For an extended treatment of style in dance see Selma Jeanne Cohen's excellent discussion in Next Week Swan Lake. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1982) Dancers Natalia Makarova and Paul Taylor have both suggested that dance style requires a knowledge of what not to do. (Cited in Cohen, Next Week Swan Lake) For each choreographer the result is something like a language of movement that is more than the personal embellishments of individual dancers or national influences.

The above remarks represent the beginnings of how an aesthetician might approach the analysis of style in dance. But already it seems clear that such an approach, however oversimplified, would be difficult to present to a public unfamiliar with aesthetics. The solution that was adopted was to reduce the discussion to a single aspect of style, to speak of it along this line: Style is a concept that aestheticians use to designate different approaches to dance. A style of dance represents the movement language of the choreographer and dancers--steps and gestures--processes and structure together with the choice of music and set and costume design. Within the ballet it is possible to identify different styles: romantic (Bournonville), formalist (Balanchine), and jazz (Ailey). (The style labels, "romantic," "formalist," and "jazz," are themselves general categories allowing for variations and change when applied to different choreographers or to different phases within the overall work of a single choreographer.) The sections of the piece in which I appeared included elements of each of these styles. Then the other pieces in the concert following exemplified the various styles. During the course of the discussion it was possible to include various other aspects of style by reference to individual variations among the dancers and to refer to the national qualities of the various dances, thereby showing the complexities of the concept. The project was a very modest one to be sure. It does suggest a beginning by which to make a bridge out of the circle to a public.

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The project also opened up possibilities for establishing contact with the performer's point of view. This effort is again beset with problems. Dancers are highly gifted persons, but the demands of their program of movement training to prepare their minds and bodies for performance, does not necessarily allow for a comparable training in verbal, and, particularly, in philosophical discourse. (There are of course exceptions such as the choreographer-dancer Kenneth King, a former philosophy major and a writer who has contributed to such publications as Ballet Review and The Paris Review.) Consequently, dancers and aestheticians may have difficulty communicating.

There are various reasons for this fact, some of which result from the circumstances of a dancer's life style. Dancers in a company work very closely with each other. They depend upon each other for mutual success and even for physical safety, as well as for emotional security and companionship. Some dancers actually believe that dancers exist in a world apart from other persons. Fortunately it is possible to break through. The close contact with the touring company led to an unexpected

opportunity. Two principal dancers, John Meehan of American Ballet Theater and Ann Marie DeAngelo formerly of the Joffrey Ballet approached me and made inquiries about philosophy and its relation to dance. I expressed a corresponding interest in their views of dance as performers.

The discussions began with the question of the relative adequacy of words and dancing as means of communication. The dancers were convinced of the superiority of steps, gestures and the expressive elements in dancing for communication, and I felt obliged to ask for equality of words. These discussions led to an analysis of the various components in dancing: steps, gestures, technique, concentration, the expressive element or "presence," and a search for the comparable elements in verbal language. Questions arose: For example, are words and sentences comparable to steps and phrases? Are the rules of technique comparable to the rules of grammar? What is the role of the mind in dancing? What are the respective roles of ideas and feelings in dance and philosophy? A similar question applies to the body: dancers obviously use the body in their work. So do philosophers, but in a different sense. How do the performer's and the philosopher's views of dance differ? One dancer asked with full seriousness why anyone would want to watch a performance. She stated that it was very satisfying to do the dancing, because this performance brought together her own powers, physical, technical, and expressive, and provided a challenge. But she didn't enjoy watching dances by others. From this dancer's perspective the performance was an action done for a purpose: to master a discipline, to gain control, to achieve satisfaction, to achieve what she described as a "certain moment," when the movement, inner concentration, feeling and idea all come together. This is a performer's point of view.

What is the aesthetician's point of view? Plato (Plato, Laws, Books II, VII) and Aristotle (Aristotle, Poetics, 1455-1458; Politics, 1337-1342) saw dancing as a contribution to physical and intellectual culture. Plutarch (Plutarch, "Table Talk," in Moralia, Vol. IX) addresses the specific elements that constitute a dance. Adam Smith, (Adam Smith, "Of the Imitative Arts," The Works of Adam Smith, Vol.V. London: Strahan & Preston, 1811) Batteux (Charles Batteux, Les Beaux Arts: Reduits Un Meme Principe. Paris: Chez Durand) and others discuss the relation of dance to the other fine arts, such as music, poetry, and the visual arts. Bergson (Henri Bergson, Time and Free Will. New York: Harper and Row, 1960, pp. 11-13, 110-112) and Spencer (Herbert Spencer, "Gracefulness," in Essays Scientific, Political, and Speculative, Vol. II. New York: Appleton & Co., 1897) use particular aesthetic concepts such as grace to designate the essential, ambient or expressive quality of dance. More recently, philosophers have turned to questions involving the epistemological and ontological status of the dance work.

In their discussions of dance, aestheticians are inclined to look for general characteristics of the art rather than to specific characteristics of individual works. Aestheticians thus reflect a more general point of view than that of the performer. Yet such generalizations are useful only if they are faithful to characteristics of particulars. The aesthetician looking to dance performances might ask such questions as, what is the dance work of the performances? The search for answers has led philosophers to consider ways to designate the "dance work." A performance exists only for a finite duration in a particular space. It

lacks the relatively permanent status of a painting or sculpture. Hence it is not possible to point to the physical event, except for particular moments. In what form does the dance exist "in between performances"? Does it reside in the mind/body of the dancer, or in the choreographer's memory? On video tape or film? Or can it be preserved through notations? (Or does it exist at all?) Philosophers in search of a fixed object for their study turn to notation. Goodman's remarks on the possibility for dance notation suggest a way of using notation to identify particular dance works, but Goodman would agree that the notation, apart from performances, does not adequately constitute a full account of the dance work. (Nelson Goodman, Languages of Art. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967, pp. 64, 65, 121, 122, 211-218) Others, such as Dufrenne, emphasize the importance of the performer's contribution to the identity of the work. (Mikel Dufrenne, The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience, tr. Edward Casey and others. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1973, pp. 20-25, 74-78)

In any case it is clear that the philosopher's visual or conceptual view of the dance is much broader than the dancer's participatory view. It is an external as opposed to an internal view and is perhaps subject to emendation by insights gained from the insider's point of view.

My goal in the current projects is to produce an account of dance aesthetics that will include elements of both the performer's point of view and the broader aesthetician's views. Whether these projects will produce any significant results for aesthetic theory I cannot say; at the very least they will have provided a better informed aesthetician. It is important, however, for such projects to aim toward advancing the public's understanding of aesthetics, and to explore the relation of aesthetics to the creation and performance of dance. From my point of view the primary goal of aesthetics is to produce understanding of the art forms on a variety of levels. Theory in aesthetics can be appreciated for its own interest to aestheticians, but such theory is also a means to a fuller understanding of the art for creators and spectators of the arts. (An earlier version of this paper was read at the conference on Art in Culture, Ghent, Belgium, 1980.)