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Review of "Dance as Text: Ideologies of the Baroque Body" by Mark Franko

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Review: [untitled]
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kinds of reading and watching films. Without this additional labor, scores appear as thousands of details without delivering a clear, overall sense of a dance. This problem can be minimized by including written analyses that offer insights into the overall gestalt of the dance.

The movement analyses that Stodelle contributes to each score are written as chronological scenarios of weight changes, movements of body parts, and changes in the dancer’s inner feelings. The following is from her analysis of the opening of “Pointed Ascent,” the second half of Two Ecstatic Themes.

The first series of movements has an irregular staccato accent not unlike that of a tack hammer. Abrupt shifts of weight coincide with rhythmically punctuated efforts to rise from the prone position that marked the end of “Circular Descent.” A shoulder twists, an elbow thrusts upward; the head turns desperately from side to side in search of means of support; the hips pull under at a plane that gives the dancer secure positioning for subsequent attempts to rise. Gone is the luxury of sensuous suspension; everything now hangs on the thread of tenuous balance, a direct struggle against gravity and its threat of domination. (Pp. 61–62)

Although Stodelle writes from the third person, about “the dancer,” she doesn’t treat this analysis from the vantage point of a viewer. Stodelle writes as if she is performing the movement or as if she is trying to think through the movement for “the dancer.”

Pleasurable as it is to kinesthetically work your way through Stodelle’s analyses, she never gives you a succinct sense of the overall structure and impact of the work. For Two Ecstatic Themes, this is provided, later, in Humphrey’s 1935 program note:

Two Ecstatic Themes is the keynote to Miss Humphrey’s mature work. The first part is in circular and spiral movements, soft and sinking, to convey an emotional feeling of acquiescence. The second part, in contrast to the first, moves in pointed design to a strident climax suggestive of aggressive achievement. The whole is counterpoint of circular and angular movement, representing the two inseparable elements of life as well as of design. (P. 64)

The contrasting vantage points represented by Stodelle’s analysis and Humphrey’s program note point to a general problem with using this collected volume for historical study. Viewing films or reading other sources, such as Marcia B. Siegel’s Humphrey biography, Days on Earth, is more helpful in realizing the overriding impact of the dance (3).

These scores contain a clear indication of their production history, information noted scores sometimes lack. For example, the notation for Air and Day on Earth honors the contributions of the casts appearing in the work at the time of notation. For Air, Stodelle worked from the Westinghouse film, and the individual parts are both designated with letters, A, B, C, D, and E, and with names, Doris, Dorothy, Hyla, Ernestine, and Cleo (pp. 18, 19). Parts in the Day on Earth score are marked J for José Limón, R for Ruth Currier, L for Letitia Ide, and C, the only generic designation, for child (pp. 113-215). The inclusion of this information allows readers to understand the collective nature of dancemaking and the contributions dancers have to their roles.

Other included information helps readers realize the long, labor-intensive process of finalizing a score. As dances are reconstructed from film, research, and memory, and then Labanotated, a surprising number of people help shape the score. Stodelle reconstructed Humphrey’s Air and Two Ecstatic Themes for the Limón company in 1975. Jane Marriott began the notation at that time. Both notation and dance were revised in 1980. At least two people check each score, a process that involves reconstructing the work on another set of dancers, and yet another person does the autography (pp. 1, 2, 53, 54). The history of production for the Day on Earth score is even more complex, including multiple revisions and greater input from dancers.

In 1995, Humphrey-ites celebrate the one-hundredth anniversary of Humphrey’s birth with a variety of activities including an October Humphrey conference at Teachers College • Columbia University, a memorial service in Oak Park, Illinois, a conference in London, and a concert of Humphrey reconstructions in Taiwan. These gatherings will provide opportunities to see the diverse perspectives available in written, Labanotated, and video sources played out in performance and lecture halls. People who knew Humphrey personally can converse with people who know Humphrey only as an historic figure. Humphrey specialists—the Labanotators, reconstructors, and dancers—can carry out discussions with the historians and critics who strive for a broader picture of Humphrey’s life and work.

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NOTES


Mark Franko is a choreographer, dancer, dance theorist, and dance scholar, and this book reflects the full range of his artistic and intellectual commitments. It is a profoundly interdisciplinary work, which takes as its subject French court dance between 1580 and 1670 but which speaks most urgently to choreographers of the late twentieth century. Franko describes a new approach to historical dance that he terms “construction,” as opposed to reconstruction; construction, he argues, aims to recreate the

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power of the original dance rather than its literal steps and gestures. Franko practices what he preaches. In 1990, for example, he choreographed a new work of baroque dance, Characters of Dance, and in one of four appendices to the present volume he publishes his preparatory notes to and photographs of the piece. These materials help the reader to grasp what Franko means when he talks elsewhere in the book about using critical theory rather than positivistic research to understand dances performed in the 1580s, 1620s, or 1670s. Working from the same meager base of evidence as those who try to reconstruct the lost dances of the late Valois and early Bourbon court, he has tried to imagine what their kinetic and visual effects would have been and to craft new dances that produce such effects. Critical theory in Franko’s hands can make a significant artistic statement.

But Dance as Text: Ideologies of the Baroque Body is not simply a choreographer’s manifesto for a new approach to historical dance, although I think this is the most important contribution of the book. Reflecting its author’s interdisciplinary interests, it is also a critique of existing scholarship on the dances of the period 1580 to 1670 and a reinterpretation of the nature of baroque dance as such. Although his writing is difficult and his history weak, Franko offers a series of close readings of key dances of the French court dance tradition that will require attention by future dance scholars. He makes a convincing argument that the relationship between the physical and spoken or written (textual) components of court dance changed in artful ways over the century under review. His fresh look at the danced and the literary elements in these performances is fruitful; his account of the historical reasons for the changing relationship between bodies and texts is less satisfactory.

A word of caution at the outset: this is not a book for beginners, and certainly not one for undergraduates. The surviving evidence of these dances is not systematically described or evaluated. Franko either omits or confines to footnotes such basic information as the occasion, setting, patron, choreographer, dancers, audience or subject for the performances he analyzes. He does not define such terms as “theatrical dance” or “twentieth century critical notions of ‘performance text’” and he does not explain why “court ballet” is not the same thing as “ballet at court.” Franko acknowledges his dependence on the scholarly work of Margaret M. McGowan, and the ideal reader would be familiar with her books on French court dance from 1581 to 1643 (1). In some ways Franko’s volume functions best as a commentary to be read alongside those of McGowan.

Franko will also startle advanced students of dance history, however, by his periodization. Rejecting the dates to which dance historians have traditionally given the label baroque (1660 to 1750), he instead follows the chronology of literary scholars and calls the dances of the preceding period, 1580 to 1660, baroque. In Franko’s view Louis XIV’s founding of a royal academy of dance in 1662 signaled a new era in dance history in which centralized training and regulation fundamentally transformed the character of French court dance (2). He is interested in the evolution of court dance before the professionals and bureaucrats cracked down on it. In its “potentially chaotic” mixture of “dancing, acting, improvisation, miming, and mumming,” its audience participation, and its “vertiginous complexity of collateral arts” baroque dance, as Franko defines it, is “much closer...to twentieth century performance art” than to later developments in academic dance (p. 1).

Within the period he has selected for attention Franko highlights exemplary works from each of three distinctive moments: (a) when dance is textual, (b) when dance is anti-textual, and (c) when dance and text collapse into one another. Two Valois court dances, the Balet des Polonais of 1573 and the Balet comique de la Royne of 1581, illustrate Franko’s thesis about the textuality of dance. Dance’s dependence on writing at this historical juncture is best expressed in choreography that placed the dancers’ bodies in geometrical patterns spelling out words. Dances are interludes that interrupt spoken sections of the production, serving as icons of order to underscore the literary message of a universe of harmonious stability. The court entertainments of the Valois dynasty are, of course, in poignant counterpoint to the reality of religious war outside their palace gates.

After a brief excursion on Montaigne, Franko moves forward to the reign of Louis XIII (1610-1643) and uses the burlesque ballets of the 1620s, particularly Les Fées des forets de Saint Germain of 1625, to argue his thesis about dance as anti-textual (3). Narrative has no role in this production, there is no moral to the non-existent story, and there is no dramatic action for the dances to interrupt. Instead of a sequence of acts and interludes we simply have a string of danced metaphors. Farcical figures (fées or fairies) symbolizing music and dance frame three unrelated and self-mocking scenes of gamesters, lunatics, and soldiers, representing “three different aspects of dance: the improvised, the unregulated, and the satiric” (p. 88). While spoken texts or récits occur in the entertainment, the outlandishly dressed participants and their improvised movements permit “ample space for any dancer to work against the text of his récit, producing unexpected ironies” (p. 94). In a spirit of playful whimsy, rather than pointed critique, courtier-performers make fun of everything from love to valor.

In his penultimate chapter Franko proceeds to the moment when dance and text collapse into each other during the early personal rule of Louis XIV (1643-1715), highlighting two of Molière’s comedy-ballets, Les Facheux of 1661 and Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme of 1670. Franko argues that in these works Molière consciously inverts the conventional relationship between dance and drama by making plays about dance. In Les Facheux the old sequence of act and interlude now becomes a danced text about the act of interruption, and in Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme Molière weaves a dance lesson and a dance spectacle into the plot of the play. Court dance’s own discussion of dance, which we saw first in burlesque ballet, reaches its climax with Molière’s comedy-ballets, just as Louis XIV brings the curtain down on baroque dance as we have come to know it. The king’s academy arrests the developing autonomy of a form that can talk about itself and
was given two different dates, both
cially existence and the capriciousness of
ary tradition of ironic and sometimes
ances take their place in a lengthy lit-
matic way Franko suggests. Such

what has happened is that Franko has had his
hands full staying on top of two disci-
plines, dance and literary theory, and
that like many literary scholars he works
with only a rudimentary and outdated
reading list of historians. This is unfor-
tunate, if understandable, because one
of the very richest and most conceptu-
ally refined fields of historical inquiry
has been French political and social his-
tory of the seventeenth century.

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NOTES
1. Margaret M. McGowan, L’Art du
ballet de cour en France, 1581-1643.
Comique” by Balthazar de
Beaujoyeux, 1581. Binghamton:
Medieval and Renaissance Texts and
Studies, 1982; Ideal Forms in the Age of
Ronsard. Berkeley: University of Cali-
ifornia Press, 1985; The Court Ballet
of Louis XIII. London: Victoria and
2. In Appendix 3 Franko publishes the
original text and an English translation of
the statutes of the royal dance acad-
emy established in 1662.
3. In Appendix 2 Franko publishes the
original text and a translation of a con-
temporary prose synopsis of Les Fées
des forests de Saint Germain (see chap.
4, n. 67).

DANCING: THE PLEASURE,
POWER, AND ART OF MOVEMENT,
by Gerald Jonas. New York: Harry N.
Abrams, 1992. 256 pp., photographs,
Bibliography, Index. $45.00.

DANCING, Rhoda Grauer, executive
producer. Produced by Thirteen/WNET
in association with RM Arts and BBC-
TV; distributed by Public Media Home
Video, Chicago, Illinois. VHS format,
color, 8 tapes approximately 1 hour
each. $199.95.

It is rare in today’s publishing world to
see ventures as ambitious as Dancing,
a lively and lovingly crafted book that
is a companion to an equally lavish
eight-part video series. The book is lav-
ish in its spectacular color plates (125
of them) and black and white images
depicting dance as portrayed in artifacts,
drawings, paintings, and photographs.
The bibliography too is extensive, or-
ganized first by general works and then
by chapter topic. While the bibliogra-
phy will facilitate further exploration on
the part of readers, it will point them in
the direction of studies of specific dance
genres rather than to the theoretical lit-
erature on the themes.

Dancing is ambitious in its scope and
organization. It combines two ap-
proaches often separated, dance history
and criticism, and the anthropology of
dance. The former has tended to focus
on western forms while the latter has
included non-western dance. Dancing
also avoids organizing material by time
period or geography, choosing rather to
examine historical and cultural aspects
of dance by topic or function. Topics
include dance as an indicator of iden-
tity, as part of religion, as an aspect of
social order and power, as an expres-
sion of the values and mores of society,
especially issues of gender, as exempli-
fied in classical forms, as a way of
bringing about the fusion of different
cultural traditions, as a medium of in-
dividual accomplishment and creativity,
and finally as a statement of where we
are today at the end of the twentieth
century. Each of these topics is illus-
trated by specific dance genres and tra-
ditions.

The video series connects with these
topics but is not synonymous with their
portrayal in the book. It is an excellent