

'AROUND THE HISTORICAL'

A Survey of Dance Developments Throughout the Ages

By Sophia Williams

FOR students interested in dances of a given period it is useful to have a total historical perspective. It is useful to see a period in context of developments throughout history and to learn of the general nature of dance - its basic features - its varying styles and functions and mode of execution at different cultural eras. Albeit a brief survey should give the student of dance an awareness of its essential substance and subject matter and style.

First a dance has meaning - it grows out of the values of a culture; it is a vehicle for communicating social and cultural ideals and traditions. Secondly, it is a formal arrangement of dancing elements - rhythm, textures and designs which give it an intrinsic dynamic life. Thirdly, a dance can always be placed in context - it is performed at a particular time in a particular place for a particular purpose - it may be a prayer or lament or mourning, a celebration - an enactment of life's important occasions, e.g. birth - death - marriage - war. Whatever the period or style surveyed by the student he/she learns that simple steps, gestures, turns, in fact various bodily activities are executed with technical skill and control - that dynamic rhythmicity permeates the dance and gives it impact, texture and tone and that the resultant designs and patterns embrace the activity and results in a form which answers to the inner motivations of the dance. These three elements - type of bodily action - the quality of movement - the stylized pattern along with functional purpose, and the inspirational source gives any dance a significant individuality.

For instance the Greek period portrays dance as the

- (a) Natural rhythmic movement inherent in man therefore the physical participation of the dancer assumes a closeness to natural movement and natural action. Sometimes the movements of nature are 'imitated' in the dance.*¹
- (b) We read of Greek dance as both gymnastic and mimetic - an acrobatic art, a military drill.*²
- (c) Dance, to the Greeks was a gift of the gods and the gods were addressed through dance. Dance in this instance could be considered esoteric and magical.*³
- (d) It becomes a device for heightening the drama congruent with the development of the dramatic form - illustrating the myth, the plot or character development in it.*⁴

At this time it seemed dance was elevated to a serious form of art.

Not so in Roman times, dance, especially its pantomime form, deteriorated into a debased activity which came under the judgement and law of the Church and much of the dance's Roman nature prevailed in our theatres and in recreation for centuries wherever Rome spread its empire.*⁵

THE RICHNESS OF THE MIDDLE AGES

During the Middle Ages a contempt for body and a cult for the perfection of the soul prevailed. The dance of the period, as was the case with the other arts, by the nature of its performance and subject matter exemplified the sacred,

finer feelings and spiritual attitudes - dance reached a symbolic almost mystical level.*1 At the same time it embodied concepts of the frightening ominous forces within man; it described man's struggle with his baser instincts and demonstrated his concern with death and the after-life. Often these feelings, attitudes and instincts were personified as was the case in the Medieval Mysteries and Moralities (drama)*2

Secular dance of the period embraced quite disturbing, contrary elements. There are reports of manic dance crazes disturbing divine worship, taking place in churchyards and other public places.*3 Dance was also regarded as a social leveller where rich and poor took part. Improvised folk forms sometimes demonstrated a manner for wooing; pairing and matching and the sex motif was the main driving force.*4 On the other hand other dance practices embodied themes of chivalry and romance; emphasised politeness; mannerly customs and propriety. The most momentous development of the late Middle Ages was the separation between folk and court dance; the division that grew between restraint and exuberance was exemplified in the hands of the nobility on the one hand, the the populace on the other.*5 This was the beginning of the age of professional entertainments - dancer/singer troubadour and minstrels which gave rise to the theatre dance of the Renaissance and Restoration period.*6

RE-AWAKENING

The Renaissance is considered a re-awakening period in all artistic endeavour - no less so in dance. Grand presentations - polished stylisation of earlier Medieval entertainments became the order of the day - social activities were turned into displays*1 The dance was visually enhanced - by theatre effects and elaborate costume, and it was incorporated into lavish extravaganzas of pageantry and masquerade, both outdoor and indoor spectacles of much more sophistication than medieval mummery.*2 Precise intricate patterns; specific routines, a rich dance vocabulary; strict rules of presentation and performance eliminated any folksy element or improvised fun.*2 The theatre element was so cultivated that dancing masters emerged to teach etiquette, conformity, discipline, refinement, culture and taste in connection with the dance.*3 At this period Music and Dance became affiliated in more sophisticated a manner.*4 The suite and sonata form evolved from interdependence of the two arts and the court dances of the earlier era reached a peak of performance style and musicality.*4 But it was not until the end of the 17th-18th century that we see a build on to these developments. At this time dance followed the fashion for grandeur as witnessed in Masques and Opera of the period. There was integration of court and folk idiom - the folk element was tamed, the rustic made more formal and dance was on the way to becoming a professional art, though a certain artificiality pervaded the dance in some spheres.*5 The texture and style of the dance was indeed more liberal than the dignified, ceremonial, in part sombre dance, of previous age.*6

ROMANCE AND TECHNICAL PERFECTION

Artificiality developed into affection in some spheres in the 18th-19th centuries with the coming of the Minuet and the intoxicating rhythm and romantic overtones of the Waltz, though the waltz was perhaps the most natural and refreshing of the dances of the period. In theatre, dance with an aerial grace and fairy tale background to it developed.*1 There was a mingling of dream and reality and the natural and supernatural. This was the age of the romantic, the conventional balletic forms, the unattainable dream and the idolising of the dancer as some phantom mysterious phenomena whose art of dance was made almost superhuman by use of technical stage effects.*2

Eventually there was rebellion against such strict disciplined techniques and technical effects and at the turn of the century a new freedom in dance was yearned for.*3

THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

Superficiality, dreams, fantasy had had its day, and the exotic flavour of the negro type dance shuffled its way into the hearts of all dance lovers and as a result the theatre spectacles became less patronised. Everyone at this time, was ingeniously 'doing it' - the Latin American influence popularised the musical stage, the vaudevilles and the concerts, and it did to an extent modify the classical balletic idiom although ballet continued to flourish. The pirouettes gave way to pelvic motions free inventions, co-ordinated arms and leg movements superseded pretty arabesques and attitudes and everyone rhumba(ed) samba(ed) tango(ed) rocked and rolled and did the Charleston from the New World to the Old.*1 As a result new dance styles emerged - a combination of Jazz and Ballet and indeed this fostered a search for a much freer expression through dance as exemplified by the early Modern Dance School.*2

THE MODERN IDIOM

The Modern Dance School explored all heritage in dance and used it as a means to liberate dance from entertainment to self-expression.*1 It's flavour was of the individual's own making, sometimes free and fluid (as in American early modern and at other times angular and dissonant*2 (as was the case in European dance of early decades of this century). Dance embraced the drama of the soul - it became self-respective matching psychological interests development of the 20th century.

Inspiration was found in myths, in folklore, in the primitive, in biographies and a purely academic, scholastic approach was evident in its presentation.*3 More recently however in the last two decades, a non-literal approach developed - the dance became quite devoid of the personal, and the representational. It became an arrangement of pure movement textures and designs in the hands of some choreographers.*4 In the hands of others there have been evidences of oriental influences, spiritual isolation, absurdity but certainly dance is dehumanised from its natural roots of imaging narrative, literal or ordinary human experiences.*5 The dance today can and does communicate but it is equally revered if it is a non-communication. Dance also in this present age has discovered a new home in Mass Media integrating itself with voice, sound and film.*6 Dance is used to enhance drama, particularly period plays and opera and also as purely visual theatre in its own right. Indeed, the titles of dancing projects give a clear indication of the variety of experiments that exist in the dance world of today.*7

Looking back over the centuries the student who wishes to understand an era of dance is much enlightened if a sum total of dance developments are scrutinised. From this brief survey it will be noticed that one age creates with and on the achievements of former periods or indeed provides a complete antidote to it. It is of course obtuse to provide notes of this kind without illumination. The following footnotes and references on which the notes are based might serve to bring the whole to life.

REFERENCES / ILLUSTRATIONS - FOOTNOTES

ANTIQUITY

- *1 Dancing through the Ages No. 14. (About 450 B.C.) also
The Greek Dance - Ruby Ginner - Plate XII
Ibid No. 17
- *2 Ibid No. 16, also Greek Dance Plate VI
- *3 Ibid No. 12
- *4 The Greek Dance. Ruby Ginner. Plate V
- *5 History of Dancing. Vuillier. Page 43.
 - (i) 'Dancing was completely perverted'
'Rome outdid our Bullier and Moulin Rouge'
 - (ii) 'the Massaliots refused to grant them a theatre lest their
own manners should become perverted by their indecency'.

THE RICHNESS OF MIDDLE AGES

- *1 Sacred Dance - Maria-Gabriele Wosien. Plate 20
History of Dancing. Vuillier. Page 46. 'Dance of the Redeemed'
- *2 Ibid. Page 48.
Also see Dictionary of Dance - Raffe. Page 325 - Dance of Death
- *3 Ibid - Page 60
'Numbers of people were seized with a dancing mania threw off their
clothes - crowned themselves with flowers and hand in hand went singing
and dancing through the streets and churches'
- *4 History of Dancing. Vuillier. Page 59
'The natural gaiety of the Gauls, their passion for violent exercises
and for sensual gratification disposed them to love dancing and to give
themselves up to it with keenness.'
Also see Dance through the Ages. No. 34 'Dance of the Ring'
- *5 Compare Dance through the Ages No. 38 'Shepherd's Dance' with
No. 37 'Dance in the Garden of Pleasure'.
- *6 Richardson Collection.

RE-AWAKENING

- *1 Baroque Theatre - Margarete Baur-Heinhold. Page 53
See also New and Curious School of Theatrical Dancing - Lambranzi Plates
1 - 22
- *2 Baroque Theatre. Page 66
Also Dance through the Ages - Walter Sorrell. Page 112
- *3 Arbeau
Also The Dance through the Ages. Walter Sorrell. Page 123

- *4 Pre-Classic Dance Forms - Horst. Page 5
 'It was a time when all the great music was dance music.'
 Ibid Plate 22 (opposite Page 34)
 And Baroque Theatre - Pages 88-89
 See also Stuart Masques - Alladyce Nichols
- *5 See Dance through the Ages - Sorrell's reference to Noverre
 'children of the Terpsichore, cabrioles and over complicated steps
 abandon grimace to study sentiments, artless graces and expressions' etc.
- *6 Movement and Metaphor - Kirstein. Page 126-9 - 'La fille mal gardee'

ROMANCE AND TECHNICAL PERFECTION

- *1 Dance through the Ages - Sorrell. Pages 132-142
- *2 See Romantic Ballet in Lithographs of the time - Beaumont and Sitwell -
 also reference Page 39 -
 (i) 'Lady Bessington recording her impression of Taglioni'
 (ii) 'She seems to float and bound like a sylph across the stage'.
- *3 See The Dance through the Ages. Page 150 and plate opposite
 See World History of Dance - Sachs. Plate 32
 Quote: 'Our generation does not find what it seeks in Ballet in the
 world of dancing slippers, gossamer skirts and artificial steps.
 It cries out for nature and passion ... to exchange stereotype
 movements for something genuinely of the soul.'

THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

- *1 See Social Dance - A Short History. A. H. Franks
 Chapter VII plus Plates 33 to 48
- *2 The Dance through the Ages. Page 221
 'Although the "Harkness" Ballet strives for a contemporary approach to
 Ballet, it is not limited to any one style classic in technique
 but contemporary in mood'
 Dance as a Theatre Art - Selma Cohen. Page 179
 Note also a ballet (Jerome Robbins 'Fancy Free') though first performed
 in 1944 combining balletic and jazz style

THE MODERN IDIOM

- *1 Experimental Dance - John Percival. Page 9
 'Miss St. Denis was inspired (.....) to invent dances which tried to
 present the spirit of the Orient.'
 Also Ballets Suedois founded by Ralf de Mare
 '..... together with some folklore elements also included a good deal
 of avant-garde experimentation'
- *2 Language of Dance - Mary Wigman - Plate opposite Page 74 (Song of Fate)
 Page 56 (opposite) Festive Rhythm
 Page 50 (opposite) Face of Night

- *3 Martha Graham (Portrait of an Artist)
All plates and references to Greek sources e.g. Phaedra: Clytemnestra:
Alcestis
- *4 Experimental Dance - Work of Alwin Nikolais
Plate 50 'Galaxy'
- *5 Merce Cunningham - Klosty. Page 25
Speaking of Merce 'His own dancing is suffused with mystery, poetry
and madness. Generous but often frightening in their nakedness'
And Ibid - Page 24
'Merce's way of working with a stopwatch led to the company's reputation
of being cold, inhuman, impassive, expressionless, automaton'
- *6 Dance and Dancers - July 1974. Page 41. Reference to Nikolais - Dance
Theatre
'Within the canon of Nikolais dances, variety is determined by the
interaction of props, lights, people'
And 'The dancers are seen in a multitude of changing lights and slides'
Ibid - March 1975. Page 34
- reference to Mutations - Hans-van-Manen
'that mixed media piece (Mutations) of film, open stage, dancing and nudity'
- *7 The Drama Review - Post Modern Dance Issue. March '75
(i) Air Dancing - Noel Carroll - Page 5-12
(ii) Multi gravitational Dance
(iii) Contact Improvisation
(iv) Notes '64 - '74 Lucinda Childs. Page 33-36
(v) Take-Off. Page 87-93