

Early Dance and Education in the 1980s

by Judy Smith

Introduction

The 1980s in Britain has seen a period when dance classes of all kinds have thrived, within both educational institutions and the wider world; there has been a proliferation of the kinds of dance offered and an increase in the numbers attending. Early Dance has had its part in this: amateur performance groups have multiplied, demand for courses has risen and forums have been established for interchange of the latest research thinking; yet little of this has had any impact on the public education sector. There is not a lot of Early Dance in Primary, Secondary or Further Education sectors and at degree level there is scant mention of any dance prior to the nineteenth century and no systematic study of its technique or performance. There are specialist courses for the training of dance performers in classical, contemporary and many other dance styles, but not in Early Dance (1), and, even if there were, there is no long-established professional world which the trained can enter (2). This must reflect an underlying lack of status in comparison with other dance forms. Yet experience of working with school pupils and young adults, often over the full length of the school year, and in connection with cross-curricular projects (3), has shown that Early Dance can play an important part in stimulating the imagination, giving experience of movement patterns and behaviour far removed from those of contemporary Britain, and in a very important sense providing the incentive for further investigations into the cultural heritage.

An examination of why Early Dance remains on the fringe of the established dance world reveals three major factors: time, knowledge, and attitude.

Firstly, time.

In all courses at whatever level a finite amount of time is available; choices have to be made as to the best way of using this. In school there may be as little as six/twelve hours (if any at all) per year for dance (4), during which time the teacher has to ensure that there is no bias of race or gender, and, in the future, test the pupils' achievement against nationally agreed criteria (5). At degree level the constraints are fewer but nevertheless still present. Few courses offer dance as a full time course of study; time is shared with one or more other subjects. Numbers of students on course rarely allow for student choice within the course content; the course has to attract candidates, and since the dance experience of most potential candidates is either classical or contemporary this is what they think they want to go on studying. Although degree courses are not necessarily vocationally oriented, today's validating bodies always require to know what are the job prospects of students at the end of a course; the Early Dance world will provide few with a means of earning their living.

Secondly, knowledge.

In one sense this is now much less of a problem; facsimiles of treatises contemporary with the dances are now available and there are many sound texts detailing how to do the dances (6). However, there is as yet no single coherent source of reference from which knowledge can be built up rapidly and, even if there were, many of the skills can be learnt only through repeated practice over a period of time; even then, as a seventeenth century master explained (7), to get the finer skills you need to have lessons with a master. At a very different level knowledge is a problem. Since degree courses embody so little Early Dance they do not have specialists in this work as part of their permanent staff (8); thus there is no

potential for influencing the direction of teaching and research. In schools the problem is entirely different; here teachers are supposed to update themselves in such diverse fields as: information technology, multicultural education, preparation for the world of work, national curriculum, attainment targets and pupil profiling; what time is left for such peripheral issues as Early Dance? The best that could be hoped for (9) is that they take a short course, the content of which is then passed on to their pupils. However, to be able to get to the heart of something requires in-depth knowledge; it is relatively easy to remember a step sequence but much harder to achieve the essential poise. For early dance this means understanding something of the period in question as well as the dances themselves. On the positive side, most teachers do have access to people who have this specialist knowledge, and fruitful liaisons can be developed when teacher and early dancer work in collaboration. It is this approach which has been used in most of the work which has been undertaken in school and the method has been found to have several advantages. It reduces the isolation of the teacher, because in working as a team problems can be shared, and there are additional pairs of hands at critical moments. The specialist can provide a first filter on source material; much of the required material is already known and well-trieed, therefore there is a more realistic base on which to found decisions about suitability for a particular class. Many hours of searching can be eliminated for teachers but at the end of the day they must have a very important part to play in the selection of material for their situation; they are the experts on their children, and their expertise is crucial to the success of the work. The specialist's most direct input is usually the less familiar aspects of practical performance, including technique, style and convention.

Thirdly, attitude.

Outside its own milieu, Early Dance is rarely valued for its artistic content; reports of performances make reference to the costume and even to the music, but rarely in an informed way to the quality of dance style or technique (10). It is often viewed as an excuse for dressing up and sometimes for dissipation (sometimes justly but more frequently not): an activity for those who cannot do 'proper' dance. Other arts have an established professional outlet yet for Early Dance there is little opportunity to see its performance by those who devote their full-time work to the development of expertise. Whilst there are some groups who do operate in the professional sphere, almost all rely on other sources of income; what is remarkable is the standard they manage to achieve in the limited time available. Teachers of Early Dance fall into the same category: other forms of employment provide an income and they are rarely able to give Early Dance the attention they would like it to receive.

At school level it is often thought to be irrelevant and boring for pupils, too far removed from the experience of today's living to have any significance for contemporary youngsters. Admittedly there has to be something to catch the interest, and this varies from age to age. The Primary curriculum usually includes some topic with an historical context; this, together with the added incentive of a culminating presentation, is often sufficient motivation for this age group, and has the advantage of involving all of the pupils in a class. At the secondary level some more specific event is usually necessary, for example the need to include dance in

the school play, or a local celebration of a past event where the Head wants the school's name to be seen, and says, 'Wouldn't a bit of dance be nice!' This often only involves a few pupils who are selected because of their ability to contribute to the overall event rather than their prowess in dancing. All of the above do always put Early Dance at the service of some wider context, yet in practice this does seem to be a major contributing factor in gaining pupils' motivation. It is hard if not impossible to make its study relevant to 20th century children in isolation from its social setting, and even more importantly to do so is to neglect one of the major reasons for dances's significance in former years, when it was seen as a way of inculcating acceptable behaviour (11). It does seem to be easier to find relevance at the primary rather than the secondary stage of schooling: at this age pupils have not become so self-conscious and more easily fall into role; they find little difficulty in entering into the spirit of an age and quickly learn conventions. Their love of rule-bound situations can be used to advantage, and they will soon tell you that feet are too high off the ground or that the pattern is not symmetrical. By the secondary stage pupils' lives are much more bound by twentieth century ideas of emotion and romance, and they find the formal qualities of the dance much more difficult to accept. In every case it is important to note that youngsters of today demand immediate relevance; they need acceptable explanations and are not prepared to accept teachers' judgements as necessarily correct.

Having argued that interest can be gained, the charge still has to be met that 'They won't be able to master the steps and patterns'. Any response to this must be prefaced by another question: 'Can anyone in the twentieth century achieve what was achieved in past times by daily practice over long periods of time?'. The answer is of course that very few adults master the techniques adequately, so what is the particular concern with children? Within the constraints of child art (12), work has shown that steps and patterns do not present huge difficulties; care does need to be taken in the selection of both the period and the specific dances (13), and consideration needs also to be given to the way in which the material is introduced. Staging and progression are of paramount importance, and are specific to particular classes; this is the art of skilful teaching.

The Curriculum

It might now be useful to examine some of the features which typify schools of today, and which therefore will affect the extent to which Early Dance has any part to play in the curriculum. It is a long time (in the history of education in England and Wales) since there have been so many constraints on the way in which schools organise their timetable; National Curriculum directives account for the vast majority of the working week (14). Art and Music are Foundation Subjects, and as such have to be taught to all pupils up to the age of 16. They have an allocation of about 5% of the week each, ie about one hour. Drama no longer appears in its own right but as part of English, and has an emphasis rather different from that in current practice. Dance is to be included as part of Physical Education, also a Foundation Subject, and will have to share the allotted one hour with all other sporting and health-related-fitness activities. For all these subjects there will be nationally agreed criteria against which pupils will be tested at ages 7, 11, 14 and 16 (15). The location of dance within Physical Education reflects its traditional place in the English education system and will make the inclusion of Early Dance less easy than if it had been located amongst the arts. Its other natural home has been with Drama, but the inclusion of this with English is once again

going to pose greater problems than have been hitherto present. On the positive side, given the little freedom left in timetabling, schools are likely to be looking for opportunities to integrate work. In the Primary School this already happens; a topic will be pursued over a period of time and will include a range of subjects and activities. In the Secondary School the development of creative/performing arts departments also has been an opportunity to extend the thematic approach. Both these situations provide realistic occasions for the introduction of Early Dance. It is unrealistic to suppose that Early Dance will ever play an independent part in schooling at any level, and it is important that opportunities for its inclusion within other events should not be thought of as mere servicing, but as a means of enrichment and stimulation that would otherwise be missing. It would be quicker to tell the pupils about the events and dances, and in many people's eyes more economical of staff time and effort, but observation of pupils working does lead one to believe that understanding is intensified when there is direct physical involvement through movement and dance.

In order to give pupils this sort of experience, Heads and/or influential teachers need convincing that given the little bit of time left when National Curriculum demands have been fulfilled, the addition of Early Dance will have particular benefits for the pupils and/or the school, for it would be foolish to neglect the argument that thirty pupils in period dress are very eye-catching, and make good publicity. Indeed the new Chairman of the National Curriculum Council said at a recent conference (16) that those working in the arts had no need to be concerned about their future presence in school because of the contribution they can make to its 'good' image through performances and exhibitions. Given Local Management of Schools and Open-Access this becomes an excellent bargaining point, however dubious its educational value.

However it is of much more benefit to consider what pupils can gain by participating in activities involving Early Dance. Although fun and satisfaction would not in themselves justify Early Dance's inclusion on the timetable, their absence would almost certainly lead to exclusion. Worries are expressed about the reaction of boys, but, given that the overall context is appropriate, experience has shown that they are well able to enter the spirit of the age. Careful selection of dances ensures sufficient release of energy; for example a few rounds of Bouffons or a stirring Galliard leaves all but the very exceptional breathless, and being literally able to 'lord' it over the others releases imagined senses of power. They love period dress, secretly being seen to preen themselves and adopt the poise they have been urged to acquire in class time; a hat is a novelty that never seems to lose its appeal, and being dressed appropriately does more for their carriage and walk than weeks of practice in ordinary clothes. It is perhaps important to point out that much of the work that has been undertaken has been in schools from so-called deprived areas, where even some of the 'toughest' pupils have become leading lights in the presentations. Indeed after one event involving teenagers the daughter of one teacher was overheard to say 'I've just seen the heavies from up the park and they are all in fancy dress!'

But at the end of the day schools are about learning, and therefore pupils must be seen to learn something, preferably something that will have significance for their life after school. Thus, although the acquisition of skill in performance may be an essential element of the learning process, it cannot be an end in itself, and must become part of a greater whole. Usually what is important is that certain images of the contemporary lifestyle are retained rather than remembrance of fragmented detail; so for example, in a recent piece of work based on a banquet in 1588 (17), it was hoped that the children would remember such things as overt class-

consciousness, formality and restrictions, and the place of women. There were communicated not only through reading and investigation but also through the way dances and movement were organised. The Lord entered last, yet all had to wait to be told, by him, that they could sit down; girls had to wait for their boys to collect them and allow themselves to be led in their dancing; patterns had to be the same each time, and precise. The need to maintain such attitudes throughout the weeks of preparation, and the presentations, reinforces their importance. Customs and values such as these are alien to twentieth century youth: they live in a society that advocates equality, where women are independent and where rank gives no automatic right to preferential treatment. By physically experiencing the differences the children do find it much easier to imagine what it was like to live in such a former society.

The Requirements of the Dance Style

Obviously one of the biggest challenges is the development of sufficient movement expertise to master the requirements of the period style. Early Dance styles demand a vocabulary far removed from that normally used by the average school pupil. The pupil of today moves rapidly from one activity to the next: boys in particular spend free time chasing each other or a ball; their movements tend to be whole-body centered, large, unrestrained, and taking up a lot of space. The dance forms they admire today are torso-orientated and on the spot; disco uses arm rather than leg action; Afro-Caribbean emphasises hips and downward focus. On the other hand, Early Dance forms tend towards containedness, uprightness, smallness of size, balance and poise. All of these can be acquired in time but their development requires short sessions of practice over a long period, and the use of time within these practices needs careful balancing so that dances which require slow sustained movement are followed by those that allow for greater vigour. Indeed the need for slowness in dances poses a real challenge to younger children, as it is foreign to their natural mode of movement; also the shortness of their legs means that their comfortable stepping speed is faster than that of adults, and they frequently respond to a slow tempo by simply inserting extra steps. The solution has often been to teach the dances at a tempo faster than that desired and gradually reduce as control increases. Co-ordination and timing may also be a problem: in the Galliard the exact point of the cadence is not easy to achieve and is frequently anticipated; in Bouffons the co-ordination of sword action and footwork is tricky, and for less able children it has sometimes been necessary to do the sword sections standing still and use the feet only for the linking sections, arguably a better solution than continually being out of time.

Even though the skilled teacher will have selected dances with steps that are within the ability of a particular class, other problems still have to be faced. The notion of practice and repeating something to get it exactly right is increasingly removed from the pupils' experience; once a semblance of the activity has been achieved it is 'done'! Repeating things often enough to get them right is further complicated by the fact that many children are not as fit as they used to be; they tire easily even when doing mild exercise and thus can only sustain an activity for a short period of time. Additionally in Early Dance steps and patterns do have to be done in fairly tightly prescribed ways; pupils' other dance experiences, usually of the 'creative' kind, have given them a rather different expectation, ie that doing something *different* from others is what is required. Thus it becomes necessary for the teacher continually to invent new ways of doing the same thing, and from the very first practice to demand the things that will become important in later work. For example, in

Elizabethan work, making a reverence assumes vital importance from the beginning, along with assuming a subservient posture to anyone who could possibly be thought of as superior. At the end of the day it is probably this attitude to repetition which determines the degree of success of the presentation.

The other aspect of Early Dance study requiring attention is that of pattern; many of the dances need precise attention to the formal quality of line, and the relationship of one person to another. Whilst pupils quickly comprehend the underlying rules, for example, that of symmetry, they find it much harder to put them into action. Again this results in part from the different expectations of today's education. Schools on the whole prize individuality. In other lessons pupils will be urged to express their own opinion, not to copy what others are doing; only occasionally are they engaged in unison activity. It is a very rare school where choral speaking or drill play any significant part in the curriculum. Yet often in Early Dance a sense of togetherness and conformity dominates; individuals are important only as they contribute to the whole, and each has a designated role to play. This need for corporate action can provide a powerful antidote to the competitive nature of many other activities.

A Real Historical Understanding

However, despite the strength of these arguments, more important questions must be asked about the extent to which the pupils have internalised something about life in a different age, and how well they are able to differentiate between mere fantasy and imagination based on real historical understanding (18). There is absolutely no doubt that children can play the roles of people in the past and that they can do this with some feeling for what it might have been like to be alive in a former age, indeed it could be argued that they spend much of their free time imagining they are someone else. Whether they can begin to distinguish fact from fiction lies very much in the hands of the teacher. It is relatively easy today to get hold of facsimilies and/or good reproductions, and the better text books try to present ideas in historically valid ways. The question to be asked is always 'How do you know?', followed by 'Is there anything else you know that would lead you to think the information is correct?'. Pupils can look at, for example, the Inns of Court manuscripts and see how the dances were written down; they can be given contemporary quotations about attitudes to dance; they can actually experience the problems of keeping a hat on whilst dancing a Galliard; they can be involved in the decision-making about how particular individuals should behave. The way in which they ask questions, and respond to questions asked of them, indicates whether they are beginning to look for valid reasons for action. To have to translate the thinking into action makes the need to know more urgent; at the 'paper and pencil' level, if Lord B— enters before Lord A— because he is less important, so what?, but when this affects who comes onto the stage first the need to solve the problem becomes more immediate.

Pursuing the Authentic

However, despite being able to show that there is a lot that pupils can gain through these experiences, one is always left with the question 'Was it worth doing?'. It could well be argued also that children are being encouraged to dabble in something which is beyond their comprehension, and that the study of Early Dance is being diluted to such an extent that its validity is called into question. Two rather different questions are posed by the above, ie those of 'authenticity' and 'purity

and seriousness', though in many cases the responses are very similar. It is perfectly true to say that many pupils have in their roles as courtiers not attained the essential grace that comes from both birth and long practice (19), and their Galliards resemble those of Riche's 'verie bongler' (20); the same could well be said of many adults! However the process of trying to achieve an 'ideal' version has given them an insight into a facet of life which is different from today, and which will, arguably, be of more lasting significance because they have 'had a go'. For them the pursuance of this ideal version, or authentic product, is ultimately more valuable than its achievement (21). It is important that they have a vision of what a 'correct' (22) version would be like, and, at least in part, can recognise performances which best approach its realisation. In practice they can do this; they have no difficulty in choosing the boy who can best display his Galliard to his 'Lord'. To take the view that unless something can be done 'properly' (even if there were any degree of certainty about what 'properly' entails) it should not be done at all is to deny most pupils a potential learning experience. All child art must reflect the stage of learning to its author; judgements about its worth must take this into account as well as the absolute standards of the art form. Of course there is a conflict here between the roles of educator and performer; the best portrayal of the vision demands selection of those pupils whose performance matches the required image and hence the exclusion of others; the educator has to be concerned with the development of *all* regardless of talent. Clever organisation of material maximises pupils' strengths, but even then there will be pupils who despite their endeavours still are not able to master the requirements; in the school context they too have to be included.

Any work undertaken with school pupils has to be made socially relevant, for without this there is no chance of capturing and maintaining their attention; equally importantly there would be little justification for taking up curriculum time. In other art and dance forms this has been done very successfully without reducing significance for either pupil or wider 'art' context. As long as pupils are expected to make decisions about the worth of the work they are doing, and have the necessary tools for doing this, the danger of trivialisation is minimalised. If by keeping the activity pure and serious one excludes the possibility of involving today's youngsters, where are the devotees of the future to come from?

Whilst what has been said above is pertinent from the pupil perspective, for the teachers authenticity and seriousness are very different matters. For the teacher there is no excuse for presenting anything other than factually accurate information, and 'model' versions of the activity the pupils are going to attempt; this is the serious part of the enterprise, for whatever happens later in the work, often for very practical reasons, its foundation must lie in valid, reliable, and authentic information. Wherever possible, pupils need to see and handle good reproductions; they need to be told the basis of information given, and even more importantly, they need to be aware when there are different ways of looking at the same thing. Equally serious is the choice of content within the theme; decisions have to be made about which aspects of the material, when presented to a particular group of youngsters, have most chance of accurate use, and what context will best allow them to appreciate detail of style. It is these choices that will greatly influence how successful the pupils' final performances will be. Finally, considerable attention needs to be given to the means by which the pupils are going to acquire the necessary understandings and expertises they need. The development of their technical expertise often depends on introducing the next stage of difficulty at just the right moment.

For the teacher the vision must always be pure and the aim authenticity, though this may not always mean adopting a serious manner with the class; pupils must always be aware of what they are trying to achieve, but for them the endeavour is at least as important as the achievement.

Editorial note

References to the National Curriculum are now out of date as this article was completed in the Autumn of 1989. As 1991 draws to a close the possibility of dance establishing a firm foothold looks more hopeful.

Footnotes/References

- 1 There are some courses where Early Dance plays some part in Drama and Music studies, but not courses devoted entirely to the dance.
- 2 For many years there have been individuals who have worked in the professional world; few would say that this was their principal means of income. The number of people working full-time with Early Dance is growing but even now few depend upon it for their entire livelihood.
- 3 Most of the work with children referred to in this article has been undertaken in the context of ordinary schooling. In most cases the involvement has been as part of larger classroom projects involving a variety of other subjects ranging from history to art/design. In each case there has been regular contact with the class over at least two terms, usually for about one hour per week; the culmination has been a presentation incorporating both Early Dance and other aspects of study.
- 4 There is no obligation at present to include any dance in the curriculum. Even when present it has to share time either with other aspects of Physical Education or with other arts subjects; it very rarely gets a timetable slot of its own.
- 5 These are currently available for Science, Mathematics and English; Subject Committees for Art, Music and Physical Education will begin their deliberations in February 1990.
- 6 For example, Cruickshank, Dixon, Inglehearn, Thomas and Gingell, and the Summer School booklets produced by the Dolmetsch Historical Dance Society.
- 7 de Lauze p.24.
- 8 However, they do bring in visiting lecturers to teach specialised topics.
- 9 There are always the exceptions to this, and in the very fortunate cases the hobby of a teacher is Early Dance.
- 10 The same has been true until very recently of other dance forms.
- 11 Smith 1982 pp.185-190.
- 12 See below.
- 13 The work with which I have been involved has been either of the Tudor/Stuart period, or the much later Victorian. I would expect that Baroque work would make too high a technical demand for most pupils in ordinary schooling.
- 14 Exact times are not being specified but when Subject Committees report on Attainment Targets they are indicating the amount of time they feel is going to be necessary to give to the subject if the targets are to be met. These indicate that very little will be left for anything else.
- 15 National Curriculum Council 1989.
- 16 Warwick University, July 1989.
- 17 A project undertaken with a class of top Junior children, as part of their work on Tudor England.
- 18 DES 1985 p.11.
- 19 Smith 1988 p.30-32.
- 20 Riche 1581 p.4.
- 21 DES 1985 p.11.
- 22 As far as it is possible to know what this might be.

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