

## DANCE CRITICISM AND ANTHROPOLOGY

The differences between anthropology and dance criticism are not often recognized nor understood, particularly by those in criticism. This is especially true of cross-cultural criticism where the temptation to become an amateur anthropologist on a field study holiday is so great.

In her article "A Cross-Cultural Approach to Dance Criticism", Suzanne Walther attempts to address the problems a critic faces when asked to review an 'ethnic' performance. Her paper focuses on seven criteria that she feels that a critic must meet in order to adequately (and in as unbiased a manner as possible) write a review of a cross-cultural nature. Walther's attempt is admirable but she is handicapped from the start. While her basic premise is couched in an anthropological framework, her arguments and the subsequent substantiation for her thesis come from philosophical, aesthetic and anthropological sources. In short, the very problem she attempts to meet is in my view illustrated by her paper.

From the outset we are confronted with her 'personal anthropology'<sup>1</sup>. We are told that "the most obvious sorts of research will enable the critic to do a fairly accurate and acceptable job". Well, the "obvious" point of view is that a critic can be a researcher (or vice versa) as long as he or she is willing to accept the dubious term 'obvious'. We are never told what these "obvious sorts of research" are in precise terms, although later in her discussion Walther manages to shed this naive viewpoint long enough to specify some very important points.

Her entire introductory presentation seems to vacillate back and forth between a biased and a more sophisticated view that offers cogent suggestions. One wonders if the ill-thought-out bits bubble up when something important is said to remind the writer that she is not a 'hardened researcher' but a critic who can do 'fairly accurate research'. One of the basic problems lies in a 'mixed-salad' of theoretical frameworks and disciplinary methodology. She is one of the new generation of dance writers who hold in esteem the 'great earlier writers' of the genre. To some of us, this is unfortunate, as most of her sources date between 1922 and 1956, leaving us to ponder whether she disagrees with newer thinkers or if she is simply unaware of those outside the hallowed circle of recognized authority.

Walther's seven criteria for good cross-cultural criticism are useful. They include some that have become de rigueur in the field of criticism: know your own values, your own point of view; be well-versed in the field you elect. The anthropological background is evidenced particularly where she suggests that a critic should try to learn the intentions of the artists and try to learn how the informant perceives the dance. Again, even though she focuses on these two important points, they are diluted by the assumptions she brings to them, i.e. that a dance is "a work of art" to the performer. This may or may not be so. To Walther, however, it is important to find out what makes the dance a 'work of art'.

The problems are especially evident when she tries to apply her criteria to her own critique. There are three examples of her critical writing at the end of the article. Two are about an Asian modern dance company. The other is in reference to a performance given by the American Indian dance group, The Thunderbird American Indian Dancers. It is here that one can really see the mire dance writers get themselves into: she is so anxious to convey the 'Indianness' of the performance, that most of the valuable information is lost in a sea of generalizations, non-descript adjectives and platitudes. Statements like the following are sprinkled throughout the review: "The definite quality of the Indian style was nicely illustrated in the Rabbit Dance, which is a square dance taken over...from the forty-niners...the beat of the drum and the carriage of the dancers transformed the whole into a distinctly Indian experience." As long as statements such as these persist in critical dance writing, I am afraid we are a long way from the ideal.

We may well ask how and in what ways a journalist's and an anthropologist's reportage coincides or diverges. Walther represents reportage as a notionally non-evaluative description of data recorded by an observer. This task is basic to both critics and anthropologists. She makes a second point that is also shared by both types of professional although the terminology used by each may be somewhat different.

A critic may be considered a 'mediator' between a performer or performance and an audience while the anthropologist is thought of more as a 'translator' between two cultures or groups. It may seem as if these tasks are not so distinct. I suggest, however, that there is more at stake here than a terminological difference. There are striking divergences in intent, usage of data and methodology. As a mediator, the critic's presentation of data is evaluative as well as informative. Ideally, an anthropologist, as translator of data, presents findings as free from bias as his or her conscious aims toward objectivity permit.

In my opinion the major difference between critical and anthropological writing consists of this: it is possible for critics to perform their functions well enough with a substantial knowledge of the subject, form, elements of style, aesthetic standards and such. Armed with this knowledge, a critic may observe a performance, evaluate it and draw conclusions without ever discovering the intent of the choreographer, the process by which the choreographer developed the dance or any other more unobservable features. The particular dance's history is of little concern to the audience and is an unnecessary factor for the critic's consideration. It is, of course, helpful for a critic to have this kind of information, but it is not essential for good critical writing. It is, however, of primary importance to the anthropologist, as learning about the 'folk-model' is basic to all good anthropological enquiry. All of this is clearly symptomatic of a general malaise in dance literature.

Ten years ago, using the concept of ballet as an ethnic dance form, Kealiinohomoku addressed herself to the problem of dance literature and anthropology (1970).<sup>2</sup> She said: "It is good anthropology to think of ballet as a form of ethnic dance. Currently, that idea is unacceptable to most western dance scholars. This lack of argument shows clearly that

something is amiss in the communication of ideas between scholars of dance and those of anthropology" (1970:24).

The challenge Kealiinohomoku posed to western dance scholars and their position against the assignment of the term 'ethnic' to describe ballet, points to crucial problems still evident in western dance literature. The issues that she identified are these: (1) ethnocentrism; (2) lack of precise, meaningful definitions within the field of dance; (3) rationalization for (or explanations of) anthropological phenomena based on a priori evidence; and (4) misuse of borrowed terminology. Since dance criticism is a part of dance literature, these questions are relevant, indeed, germane to our discussion. In a sense, Kealiinohomoku speaks to all dance literature that purports to be of a scholarly nature, and it is obvious that the major difficulty arises from language-use. There is no nomenclature for the dance comparable to that of other accepted scholarly areas. The actual designation 'dance scholar' remains a dubious assignation of title and/or role to writers in and out of the dance.

In other academic or scholarly disciplines such as the social sciences, literature and music, scholarship and valid credentials are intrinsic to the designation of a recognized expert, i.e. 'anthropologist', 'musicologist', and such. There is no such thing as a 'dance-ologist'. That is not to say that there should not be such a person category, but no one at the moment is recognized as such. In other fields, there is an acknowledged difference between, for example, a musician and a musicologist, or an editor and an author. Critics in these fields are not the ones, for the most part, who produce the work or write the histories. No such distinctions have been made in the dance. A dancer is a performer. The training is rigorous and specific as in any performing field. However, 'dance scholar' for the most part has come to be a 'catch-all phrase' for everyone from those who have written about dance long enough to become permanently associated with it, to those who have completed Doctoral studies in the field, as well as everyone in between.

I suggest a pause to reflect on the fact that in music, in art and the visual arts, trained researchers have written histories while critics have focused their attention on questions of aesthetics and performance. In the dance field, it is the critics who have written the histories. The critics have become our 'scholars'. No one disputes their tremendous contribution but there is more to historical research than a compilation of historical data or re-telling the 'story'.

The question now arises, what does it all mean? We have noted earlier that in general, dance critics emphasize performance to the exclusion of the development of a critical literature. In addition, for both dance literary criticism and critical reviews of performances of all types, there exists no specific, consistent vocabulary that critics can rely on. Perhaps it is from this hiatus that confusion and a misuse of borrowed terminology has developed. The problem is a serious one. For ten years Kealiinohomoku has fought these tendencies. More recently others have joined in the fray. They become ever more insistent that dance critics (and 'scholars') define their points of view. The anthropologists seem to believe that it is only fair that when they leave

the realm of their own expertise, whether it be history, criticism, or what-have-you, these 'scholars' must cite authorities from other fields who seem to support their views. The call for a re-examination of where dance criticism and critical writing about the dance have been, should yield valuable insights into some badly needed new directions. Those of us who are genuinely interested in development in both areas of study can heed the call.

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#### FOOTNOTES

1. See Williams (1976). It is important to note that ideas on objectivity in semasiology are based on this.
2. JASHM will reprint Kealiinohomoku's article in the Autumn, 1980 issue.

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