

REVIEW

Theories of the Dance: A Social Anthropological View'. Drid Williams. (Unpublished. Ms. available in bound Xerox form, directly from the author, New York University.)

"For our present purposes it will be enough to say that by the scientific study of human movement is meant its investigation by means of controlled, empirically verifiable reports, analyses and observations with reference to some general theory of human actions". (p. 12)

Williams' manuscript is a long-overdue critical account of the theoretical content of a corpus of 250 books written between 1588 and 1976, which, the author wryly assures us, she has indeed read. A serious reading of "Theories of the Dance" discloses what a tedious, if not depressing, chore this must have been. Like Evans-Pritchard's Theories of Primitive Religion, after which it was modelled, many will find this an unpalatable work. Like her distinguished late professor, Williams' purpose was to display fallacious argumentation and out-dated theory in a body of literature and to inform readers that anthropologists have abandoned most of this.

This manuscript is a rewrite of her B.Litt. thesis, presented to Oxford University in 1971. It is used as a text for the second half of a beginning course in anthropology of the dance, part of a program in the anthropology of human movement. Its issues are no less pressing than powerful in light of the rapid growth of dance departments in Universities as well as of dance sections in bookstores. While Williams directs this essay to graduate students of dance, its ideas, as well as its tone of intellectual forthrightness, are implicitly directed to University administrators, faculty and students of anthropology, as well as dance departments, to dance critics, scholars of the human sciences, and general readers. She will very likely incur the wrath of some. One cannot write a 'remedial' text for an underdeveloped field and expect a Dance Magazine Award for it.

The reader of 'Theories of the Dance' must be prepared to have much of his or her received wisdom concerning dance shown to be based on conjecture, overgeneralization and theoretical naiveté. In contrast, Anya Peterson Royce in The Anthropology of Dance, 1977, more typically, perpetuates a tradition of non-critical writing. It is now in its second printing and would seem to be a primary resource for courses in dance ethnology. Like Williams, Royce reviews theories of the dance, but without the benefit of an explicit theoretical framework. She also seems to avoid critical assessment. In an account of the literature of a field, one might hope for attempts to develop that field, not to leave it unchanged, and therefore retrograde. Williams makes her 'personal anthropology' and her theoretical perspective explicit. Royce laments the former (p. 32), and avoids the latter. I briefly compare these treatments.

Honey and Aloes

As Williams points out, many dancers and dance educators are burdened by some form of the 'origins' question, or some notion of the 'world history of the dance'. This traces the dance or dances on some sort of an evolutionary continuum from animals and/or people dancing in the Paleolithic Age (or some unspecified primordium) through 'simple' societies with 'simple' technologies and 'simple' movements in their dances, through more complex societies, to reach a flowering either in Ancient Greece, Rome or Egypt. Somehow, this develops into ballet and modern dance. Williams attempts to put this type of thinking to rest.

"One can only suggest that, explicitly or implicitly, explanations of the dance that begin from the animal realm are meant to hold for all dancing that is ambiguously classified as 'primitive'. Are we then meant to believe that this is the 'origin' of the ballet, the classical dances of the Far East, and by implication the whole field of human, non-vocalized symbolic communication systems, including elaborate, religious rituals and the military arts? And if we are not meant to draw this conclusion, then why is the case not made explicit? Theorists who take animal behaviour as the 'magic key' to all human systems of actions are justly regarded as reductionists. Doubtless this search is for a level of simplicity which is in some sense universal, and while I have a great sympathy for the search, I do not assent to this kind of conclusion (Williams, 1981:19)."

In contrast, on the first page of The Anthropology of Dance, Royce inquires whether we can attribute dance to animals, or, rather she reports that the question has been asked. She continues, "The reliance of dance on a very basic instrument, the human body, has led people to draw parallels between the dancing of human and nonhuman primates and to speak of the dancing of birds, bees, and sticklebacks" (1977:3). While not taking responsibility for agreement with this, she introduces descriptions by Curt Sachs as; "two wonderful examples of birds dancing" (1977:3). While Royce seems content in the company of Curt Sachs, she finds an "uncomfortable fuzziness" about the innate as against acquired distinction when applied to the "dancing of chimpanzees" (1977:4). Royce's feelings of discomfort might be relieved by a stringent dose of Williams' work.

Williams reminds us of the great difficulties in any attempt to lay these speculative accounts to rest, because of the many modern writers on the dance who perpetuate the early formulations of Tylor, Scott, Pater, Fritch, Sachs, Frazer, Sharp, Hamblly, et al.

By now, it should be very clear that the ambiguity with regard to the notions of 'cause' and 'origin' is the source of much of the confusion surrounding theories of the dance, regardless of the historical period in which we find these authors. After many years of experience, I still find it perplexing that anyone thinks it worthwhile to spend such an extraordinary amount of time and effort speculating about what

might be the origin of some dance or another, when in many cases, there is absolutely no way of discovering -- in the absence of historical evidence -- what its origin was. When the search is expanded so that we are not simply asked to consider speculations on the origins of single dances or idioms of dancing, such as e.g. 'jazz', 'folk' or 'primitive' dancing, but we are asked to speculate about the origins of say, speech or drama, sculpture, painting or the other arts, only to be told that their origins are to be found in dancing, our credulity is to my mind stretched beyond reasonable limits (Williams, 1981:33).

Compare the first two lines of Royce: "Dance has been called the oldest of the arts. It is perhaps equally true that it is older than the arts" (1977:3). Later, Royce dismisses the whole troublesome question of origins, primordiums and evolutionary schema, as well as her own implicit beliefs, by saying:

"...the whole question of origins is no longer fashionable. If one is not concerned with tracing the origins of dance in general and documenting its progress through various stages, then there is little incentive to write dance histories that begin with Stone Age man and culminate in contemporary (sic) dance styles.

Writing historical accounts of dance has by no means lost its fascination for scholars, nor has the number of such studies decreased. They are simply of another order. What we find now are accounts specific either to a dance type or to a time period or both. One of the best of the first type is the book by Marshall and Jean Stearns called Jazz Dance (1968), which traces the development of jazz dancing in the United States" (Royce, 1977:93). (All underlining supplied.)

The real fault of the above passage, and of the book, lies in the assumption that individual concerns of 'fashion', 'incentive', and 'fascination' are what should guide scholars in their work. We would want to know what Royce's appraisal is of searches for origins and evolutionary schema. Does she believe we know or can know anything about Stone Age man dancing? What does she mean by contemporary dance styles, for example, ballet, Cunningham, Giriama, or the Hustle? What does she mean by historical accounts? Need criteria used by modern historians be applied? Does she realize the injustice done to historiography in likening history of the jazz to that of the dancing of Stone Age man? Without stipulative definitions and explicit assumptions, in short, without a theory, Royce's own words must be assumed to be the meanings of the authors she discusses. For Williams, 'fashion' has very different implications.

"There are at least two ways in which theory can be seen to be 'outdated': (i) as it means 'out of fashion' or (ii) as it means 'refuted by evidence', or refuted by illogicality

of argument, naiveté, misinformation and the like. The second sense of the meaning is relevant here (Williams, 1981:95).

Williams applies the same rigour to her appraisals of functionalist, emotionalist, intellectualist and religious notions as she does to evolutionary explanations.¹ She criticizes the inadequacy of these theories which tended to reduce the dance and human beings to only one of their many aspects. Choreometrics, a prime example of functionalist explanation in dance, reduces dances to a kind of reflection of subsistence activities. Williams devotes a chapter to a thorough criticism of Choreometrics: This is, no doubt a necessary effort due to, (i) its status as the so far only existing cross-cultural analysis of dance, (ii) the support, financial and otherwise, it has received from the AAAS and (iii) its serious methodological defects. In this regard Williams points to undefined units of movement, the exclusive use of filmed data and ambiguous population units. Most importantly, Williams criticizes Choreometrics' view of dance as gross motor movement, without reference to semantic content. In Choreometrics, populations sharing gross movement patterns may be grouped by a method of noting regularities and contrasts. But for Williams it is inadequate to 'just look at it',

"...because the units of movement suggested in following chapters are linguistically tied, empirically based and mathematically structured. The viewpoint focuses on the functional predicates involved in the activity of dance. It emphasizes symbolic, semiological, syntactic and structural characteristics of dance idioms" (Williams, 1981:92).²

Royce, while making a few critical remarks about the Choreometrics project, introduces it in a paragraph which begins, "...some excellent comparative work has already been done" (1977:134). My question is, what can we expect from general readers and dance writers if this is what issues from anthropologists?

The Need for the Text in Dance Education

'Theories of the Dance' offers unparalleled source material for a theoretical approach to dance in any of the ways it is studied. Texts by Chujoy, Kirstein, Sorell, Sachs and others now used by dance history teachers are full of speculation and over-generalization. They are written by people who, usually unarmed by the concerns of an academic discipline, create a mixed bag of popular psychology, antiquarian anthropology, popular ethology and narrative history. Williams' text aims at impeding the perpetuation of theories which in themselves are unacceptable to most anthropologists. The paucity of satisfactory written material rightly causes many teachers of dance history to limit their courses to studies of Western dance because they feel that writings on ballet and forms of modern dance are at least open to some historical validation. In departments where the anthropology of the dance does exist as a separate course, it is usually called dance ethnology³ and taught by someone untrained in ethnology or social and cultural anthropology.

In some cases lectures on the world's dances are limited to technique classes. Thus, I would also direct teachers of Kabuki, Flamenco, Bharata Natyam and other forms to read Williams' manuscript. As the picture then of a typical dance education department emerges, I would suggest that even ballet and modern technique classes have an implicit social anthropological slant and that their participants can benefit from 'Theories of the Dance'.

Knowing the Language

Williams dares assume the enormity of a task like this because of her 30 years as a dancer, teacher and choreographer. Not only does she know 'the language' of dance, she knows several body languages. She was 'fluent' in ballet, Kathak, Afro-Caribbean (having studied with Pearl Primus and Percival Borde for 7 years) and several forms of modern dance. She also knows 11 Ghanaian dances. She received a D.Phil. from Oxford University in Social Anthropology in 1976 for a thesis that dealt with three movement systems. She dares to rock boats, destroy icons and cause disquiet. Those of us who have been disquieted are now rather disinclined to believe with Malinowski that dance is "refractory to scientific analysis" (Williams, 1981:67). We are convinced of the seriousness and the reality of the dance; of the value of the analysis of dance for its own sake as well as the light it may shed on human communication.

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NOTES

1. There is a certain lack of clarity in Williams' chapter divisions, which no doubt is a function of the material itself: the theories do not fall into easy categories for classification. However, I would suggest that if the work were published there be included a more explicit account of how the types of explanations are classified by the author and how they overlap.
2. A published form of Theories of the Dance would provide a broader treatment of semasiology, unavailable in the present manuscript. See Williams, 1976, 1979 and 1981 for published material.
3. I refer those readers unfamiliar with the distinction between ethnology and social anthropology to Evans-Pritchard's Social Anthropology and Other Essays.

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