Review

Converging Movements. Modern Dance and Jewish Culture at the 92nd Street Y. Naomi M. Jackson. 2000. Wesleyan University Press [Published by University Press of New England], Hanover, NH. Includes bibliographical references, Endnotes, Index, Appendices (pages 229-49) and 46 illus-trations, listed on pp. xi-x. Hardback: $40.00; Paperback: $19.95. ISBN 0 - 8195 - 6419 - 2.

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Nathan Kolodny, former director of the 92nd Street Y from 1934 to 1969, says on the jacket of this book,

> *Converging Movements* takes the 92nd Street Y through 25 of its most tumultuous and creative years. It investigates at least five main spheres: the evolution of the practice and aesthetic of modern dance, the struggle of Jews to find a place within modern society, multiculturalism and the emergence of women, the power of vision in institutional leadership, and the pragmatic economic and societal forces with which all artists and arts administrators must contend or be consumed. Dr. Jackson's study is so astute and complete that it could be used as a text for any one of five areas. But when they are conjoined, one gets a clear and profound look at their interplay and complexity from the subtle analysis of a dancer's hand movements to the impact of financial resources and geographical location on an institution's mission and survival.

What Kolodny says is true; *Converging Movements* is a well-written, interesting book by an author who is undoubtedly an excellent historian. To this reviewer, the significance of the book lies chiefly in the fact that it redresses some long-standing imbalances in the literature about American modern dance.

There is very little published, authoritative material available to scholars from any discipline who may be interested in people such as Hanya Holm, Nona Schurman, Fred Berk, Bonnie Bird, Eleanor King, Bernice Mendelsohn, the 'Merry-Go-Rounders', Carmelita Maracci, Alvin Ailey, Marie Marchowsky, Katherine Litz, Pearl Primus, Janet Collins, Paul Draper, Freema Nadler, Benjamin Zemach, Lillian Shapero, Sophie Maslow, Anna Sokolow, Hadassah, Pearl Lang, Helen Tamiris, Daniel Nagrin, Paul Sanasardo, Cliff Keuter, Paul Taylor or Neta Pulvermacher. Yet these dancers (many of them choreographers) all made significant contributions to the life, development and growth of modern dance in this country, thanks to the 92nd Street Y and the American Jewish community, whose growth and development are also traced from their beginnings.

The Young Men's Christian Association [YMCA], was first founded in England in 1844 and in North America in 1851 (p. 23). The YMHA (Young Men's Hebrew Association) was founded in 1874 by prominent German Jews in New York City (p. 22). "Both YMCA and YMHA were participating in a broad social movement sweeping America at the time, whose followers sought to cultivate the individual and improve communal life of ordinary men and women through physical fitness, art, and education" (p. 23).

During the 1930's, a "new approach" to nonsectarian adult education and the arts was forged by the Y's leadership (pp. 34-38), including the ideas of John Dewey (e.g. *Democracy and Education* 1916). Modern dance began at the YMHA "as part of the new cultural policy" with the announcement that the Y had inaugurated "a new activity in the form of dancing" (p. 38). Thus begins the story of American modern dance at the Y, with performances by "Benjamin Zemach, a performer and choreographer who had worked with the Habima theater group in Moscow, traveling to America in the 1920s to find greater artistic freedom and opportunity" (p. 38).

Thanks to Nathan Kolodny's vision and direction, the programs at the Y made the Educational Department nonsectarian, for he believed that "New York is the cultural center of the world, and the Jews are a very important part of the cultural tradition. It is fitting, therefore, that the Y, which is the largest Jewish community center in the country, be a vital force in the artistic, literary and educational life of the city" (From the *YMHA Bulletin*, 12 October, 1934). Kolodny's views are the basis for the title of Jackson's book, because "it was never a matter of promoting either Jewish or general culture; it was the *convergence* of the two that was important to maintain and that seemed to closely embody the values of affluent and middle-class second- and third-generation New York Jews" (p. 50 , italics added). Kolodny's initial efforts were "to align himself and the Y with the emerging modern dance community represented by John Martin, Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman and Hanya Holm" (p. 55).

Poor performance conditions, an overall lack of respectability, and the Great Depression, contributed to the struggles of these early dancers, but Kolodny was determined to assist in the validation of the new dance art form. He aligned himself with "powerful and *less politically motivated* forces of the dance world, rather than with the insurgent left-wing dance movement of the time," convinced that "A shared humanist discourse that placed aesthetics over politics solidified the relationship from an ideological standpoint" (p. 55,italics added).

Why is it important to read *Converging Movements*? First, because Jackson consistently talks about modern dance, dancers and dances within their socio-historical contexts—a feature that strongly recommends the book to anthropologists. In *Converging Movements*, dances do not appear to be isolated phenomena, shorn of ideologies, language, and the larger society to which they belong. It not only redresses an imbalance in the history of modern dance by focussing on American Jewish culture, it illustrates the power of ideas. Had it not been for Kolodny's nonsectarian artistic and cultural policies, many non-Jewish dancers would not have been able to perform their work in a hospitable, welcoming atmosphere. They would not have enjoyed appreciative, educated audiences.

Second, the importance of intelligent, informed audiences, (without which none of the choreographic works Jackson documents would have been recognized, revered, or understood) can scarcely be overestimated. At the same time that the Y sponsored performances (see Appendix B of Dance Performances, 1935-59, pp. 231-249), it was deeply involved in educating

artistic response in the form of symposia, classes and such. I was reminded of Diana Hart-Johnson's final comments in her essay about a Graham Technique Class:

> [W]e may say that Graham's idiom of dancing—or for that matter, any structured system of human meaning—does not convey 'one sign-for-one word' meanings, but a danced idiom does convey specific concepts. Graham dances cannot be read like books (unless they are notated in a movement script . . .) however, they can be understood in ways that are appropriate to the idiom's mode of communication. In order for this to happen, laypeople must familiarize themselves with its 'code'—with its rules and meta-rules and the daily practices that constitute the kind of body language that it is. Until these are known, the meanings that can be transmitted through a single technique or idiom of movement—or for that matter through any system of body language—remain inaccessible (Hart-Johnson 1997: 209).[1]

Third, Jackson draws attention to policies at the Y that supported the work of many non-western dancers and their dance forms, notably, Argentinita and Pilar Lopez, Rosario and Antonio, Hadassah, students from the Katherine Dunham school of Caribbean dances, Mara and the Cambodian Ballet, Rukmini Devi, Hava Kohav, and many others. Without the policies and physical spaces provided by Y, many culturally valuable works would not have become part of recorded history.

Finally, in chapter 8 ('A Postmodern Precursor', pp. 207-227), Jackson offers the only lucid assessment of postmodernism in the dance world that I have so far encountered:

> Today there are two opposing poles of postmodernism with contrary ethics: one advances the idea of a pluralist, egalitarian America that is both cultured and tolerant; the other, an America where an identity politics of resentment thrives. The first view fosters an inclusive, cosmopolitan America that integrates difference into itself: the second acclaims difference to the exclusion of all else. The first takes the newer insights of cultural theory and poststructuralism regarding the mechanisms of cultural production and dissemination of power as a means of creating a world of greater equality and compassion. The second revels in the gaps, holes, fissures, and fragmentation of so-called cultural texts to decry the reality of individuals, meaning, truth and even history. Given these differences, it is clear that the Y acted as a forerunner of the first mode of postmodernism, reflecting as it did a humanist tradition in Jewish thought and ethics that strove to create a framework for equity and for individual and social betterment, rather than a space of separation, nihilism, skepticism, or lack of meaning (pp. 210-211).

This is an extremely valuable book that should be read with care by anyone who is interested in American modern dance. Similar to Brenda Dixon-Gottschild's *Waltzing in the Dark: African American Vaudeville and Race Politics in the Swing Era*,[2] Jackson's book should be required reading for every student in every dance and dance education department in this country, England, Europe, Canada and Australia, as well as those in performance studies courses, anthropology of human movement and ethnomusicology. Jackson's book provides a factual, careful picture of the origins and development of an American art form.

Endnotes:

[1] *Journal for the Anthropological Study of Human Movement* [JASHM], 1997, Vol. 9(4): 193-214.

[2] Dixon-Gottschild, Brenda 2000. *Waltzing in the Dark: African American Vaudeville and Race Politics in the Swing Era* New York: St. Martin's Press. Reviewed in *Visual Anthropology* 14(2): 213-218.