REVIEW ARTICLE

BALLET AS BODY LANGUAGE. Joan McConnell. 1977. Harper & Row, New York, Hagerstown, San Francisco, London. xv, 176 pp., photographs, appendices. $14.37

The dangers of attempting to popularize important ideas about the dance and its relationship to language become readily apparent the moment one reads beyond the title of Joan McConnell's Ballet as Body Lanugage. Judging from the title one might expect some enlightenment about the relationship between ballet and a concept of 'body language'. One might expect to gain new insights, but the title is misleading; it appears more to be a layperson's book about how to appreciate the ballet profession. McConnell herself describes it as a written version of "a joint lecture demonstration on ballet appreciation" (p. xiv -- underline supplied) often given by the author and her ballerina sister Tina McConnell. Perhaps a more suitable title might have been "Everything you Always Wanted to Know About Ballet . . .".

Because it is a written version of a lecture demonstration, the book is not, nor was it intended to be a scholarly work (p. xiv) and therefore cannot be judged upon scholarly grounds. This presents inherent difficulties: since there exists no body of shared knowledge between author and audience particular to the subject at hand, the imparting of certain fundamental theories requires considerably more attention than if one were writing for one's colleagues within a field. In the interests of promoting some real appreciation of the subject, one hopes it is not assumed that the layperson could not understand, or does not need to understand certain theories.

One would also expect the author (a linguist and former ballet dancer) to show some degree of awareness and care in the handling of issues which are highly controversial in scholarly fields such as linguistics, philosophy and social and cultural anthropology. If her goal was to foster admiration and respect for ballet beyond the pervasive romantic notion of what ballet and ballet dancers do, and are, then she might have done more than to discuss summarily "what dance is" in a mere three paragraphs at the opening of her first chapter. In so doing, she does every reader the disservice of providing as basic information some very outdated and unsubstantiated claims as to the nature and origins of dance. With regard to the latter, McConnell writes:

> "On the basis of anthropological studies, it seems that dance originated as an attempt by primitive man to imitate birds, animals and, more generally the mysterious forces of nature. In this way, he probably hoped to create a magical link between himself and the external forces beyond his control and his understanding.

> As man's life styles changed and progressed, so did his dances. In many civilizations, dance lost its original magical or religious functions and became a form of popular entertainment or recreational pastime" (p. 1, 2).

And, offering her own definition of "what dance is", she writes:

> "Dance is a series of connected, meaningful movements which externalize inner feelings" (p. 1).

The defenseless layperson will not have been aware, reading the above two passages, that (i) such anthropological studies to which McConnell refers (without offering examples or references) reflect long outdated evolutionary and functional theories in the field of social and cultural anthropology, and (ii) there are some scholars who would strongly disagree that a definition of dance or other art forms should emphasize "externalization of inner feelings" (cf. Best (1974); Langer (1970); Williams (1972)).

In her opening description of what dance is, McConnell attempts to set dance apart as an activity unique and quite distinct from other art forms. Interestingly enough, the characteristics she mentions -- its lack of permanency, its 'ephemeral' nature, and the impossibility of exactly duplicating any one performance -- are more shared than not by theatre, opera, music and other performance arts. While it is true that until the early part of this century there was little or no effective means by which to record dances, of those now available Laban-otation is the one perhaps most likely to ensure permanency of the same kind for dances as provided by music notation for music, and written scripts for plays.

Films and videotapes are useful aids to recalling some dance sequences, but run a poor second to a written script in terms of providing an accurate record for future generations of dancers. And it is largely because too many dancers have become satisfied with film and videotape that dance has retained its non-literate state and status. For non-readers and writers of notation these technologies provide an easy, 'instant' sort of memory tool, but not much more. It is surprising that anyone familiar not only with the world of ballet, but also with 'serious' academia should make the statement that "fifteen years ago, dance was not generally considered on the same level with the so-called heavy courses" (p. xiii) without realizing that this remains so today. One only has to notice where the first budget cuts are made in academic institutions in this country to see this.

More disturbing than the remarks discussed so far are a few preceding them in the foreword to the book, written by Mario Pei, McConnell's professor at Columbia University. If the point was to provide some additional 'validation' from another linguist who also regards 'ballet as body language' (as one might reasonably assume to

be the case) then one must take seriously the statements Pei makes and allow that they at least, if not the general content of the book, are subjected to scholarly scrutiny. It will serve us well to quote him at length:

> "Language may be viewed, narrowly and etymologically, as that which is produced by the tongue. But there is a much broader interpretation of what constitutes language: that which serves the purposes of both communication and self-expression. In this wider sense, language goes far beyond the spoken and written word. It includes such things as visible, audible, perceptible symbols (like traffic lights and factory whistles) that convey a message and a meaning, or that express the thoughts, feelings, sentiments, moods of a single person, even in the absence of an audience.
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> Gestural language has a long and brilliant history that probably antedates that of speech, and is illustrated in such elaborate forms as the hand gestures by which American Indian tribes of different speech communicated with one another, and the various systems ingeniously worked out for the use of deaf-mutes. The role of spontaneous, unconscious gestures, bodily postures and movements, changes of facial expression, has given rise to a science of "body language", a branch of kinetics, now skillfully and effectively applied in the field of intercultural relations, as well as within a single culture.
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> It is to this division of linguistic science that the art of dancing makes its bid for admission. The ballet is not merely a form of language, but the most exalted, most 'classical' branch of the language of the dance, comparable to the spoken and written tongue of poetry" (p. xi).

One wonders if Pei really wishes to include traffic lights and factory whistles, or even ballets, in the same category that includes Italian, English or French? Although it is true that red, yellow and green lights at an intersection convey messages to stop, proceed slowly and go ahead, they hardly constitute a 'language' of any sort. Furthermore, it is not likely that they would communicate anything at all "in the absence of an audience" (cf. Ross, 1962).[1] A more accurate statement would be that such symbolic systems are generated by the same human faculty which produces language (in the narrow sense).

As for the priority of gestural language over speech, nobody knows the truth of the matter. It is depressing to find that a linguist from Columbia University either (i) knows so little about sign languages that he lumps American Indian sign languages together with the formal languages of deaf people, or (ii) knows the difference, but does not consider it an important matter to state the difference. Furthermore, he shifts directly from mention of these two types of language to what he calls "a science of body language" which is responsible for studies of the role of "spontaneous, unconscious gestures, bodily postures and movements".

It must be pointed out here that American Indian sign languages represent a kind of lingua franca between Indian peoples whose spoken languages (of prior existence) are mutually unintelligible. On the other hand, American Sign Language, although bearing some relationship to spoken English, is primarily a gestural language not based upon any spoken language, and formalized primarily by deaf people. The language to which it is most similar, if any, is French Sign Language. At any rate, neither American Indian sign languages nor American Sign Language consists of "spontaneous, unconscious gestures..." of the kind to which Pei refers. If he does not wish to imply a resemblance between the two, then one wonders why they occupy the same paragraph.

Next Pei makes the ethnocentric statement that ballet is "the most exalted, most 'classical' branch of the language of the dance". Is Martha Graham Technique, Bharata Natyam or the Gisaro of the Kaluli any less possessed of "balance and style, rhythm and rhyme, aesthetic grace and symbolic meaning" (p. xi)? For that matter, these same qualities may be found in a football game or the circus if one extends the analogy a bit.

All Pei really does is to dress ballet up as something it is not, instead of leading us directly to any information as to why or how ballet might be regarded as a body language. It is even more unfortunate that both he and McConnell direct our attention only to the obvious messages of ballet -- those of the choreographer, the author of the narrative story, and the musical composer. Dances are not only personal exposés, and to consider them as such is to miss out on the much wider significance of dances and to reduce the extent of their symbolic nature. In fact, dances can be regarded as 'codes' to underlying classificatory and other organizational schemata of the societies they represent, and are so regarded by social anthropologists. They may reveal ideas about kinship, 'good' and 'evil', spatial orientations and other fundamental concepts. This issue of 'codes' is of concern to social and cultural anthropologists, and we think it is basic enough to an appreciation of the dance that it ought to be included in a popular book.

Turning now to the content of the book itself, there is much information regarding the history of ballet; some terminology is offered with verbal explanations of what the corresponding actions are; the ideal ballet physique is identified, and a general guide to the ballet dancer's life is presented, more than occasionally in a style reminiscent of a diary.

Yet with all this wealth of information, seldom is there a clue as to how to regard ballet as body language. There are a few exceptions where McConnell makes reference to certain structural aspects and rules of the dance idiom, however, one is tempted to believe that she is not aware in a scientific sense of what she knows, nor of its import. For example, she mentions a book by Genevieve Guillot and Germaine Prudhommeau, The Book of Ballet, in which the authors "calculate the possible combinations of all the ballet positions" (p. 28) of which there is a total of forty-seven. This number (13,284) triples when one

considers that the positions can be performed à plat (flat footed), sur la demi-pointe (on half toe) or sur la pointe (on toe). When combined with transitions, the total number of theoretically possible combinations contains ten digits. In the following paragraph McConnell quickly sets such theoretical considerations aside and takes the reader at a gallop through a very literal linguistic analogy wherein the basic ballet positions are compared to letters of the alphabet, which combine to make words (separate steps) which then form sentences (combinations), and concludes by noting that "these combinations are far more than technical precision drills. They actually speak to (the dancer), and convey a message to the viewer. After all, ballet is body language!" (p. 28).

The notion that the set of theoretically possible human movements is finite is fundamental to semasiological studies[2] of body languages. Just as in linguistics it was necessary to determine that the set of theoretically possible human vocalizations was limited (by the constraints of the vocal apparatus) so has it been necessary in semasiology to show the finite nature of the set of all theoretically possible human movements (limited by the constraints of the semasiological body). Without making reference to it, McConnell has set forth the notion of language competence and language performance, or, in Saussurian linguistic terms, la langue et la parole (cf. 1959). Her example from The Book of Ballet describes a subset of all theoretically possible human movements, that is, all theoretically possible human movements in the dance idiom Ballet. Similar sets might be described to delimit the field of study with regard to any other dance idiom. There are further subsets which might contain all the movements of one particular ballet -- this is now the level of parole -- and so on until one comes to that set of "basic positions" McConnell calls 'letters of the alphabet', which in semasiology might be called kinemes or kinesemes, and likened not to letters, but to phonemes or morphemes.[3]

Again, McConnell passes briefly over a very important concept, that of rules governing an idiom of dance, when she says "some movements are acceptable, while others are not, because they have no meaning in the language of ballet" (p. 49 -- underline supplied). Here she is hinting at the 'grammar' of ballet. Dance idioms have certain underlying principles that are constituent to their identities. Ballet is built on an imaginary 'box' that surrounds the body, and from which the body moves. As McConnell puts it, "the modern dancer...has greater freedom in the range of body movement" (p. 49 -- referring to torso movements). As an anthropologist of human movement would put it, ballet and various modern dance idioms are governed by different sets of rules, or different grammars. The grammar of ballet does not ordinarily generate torso movements that include flexion, except for ports de corps and a few others.

With the exception of these two pages there is little or no other direct mention throughout the book of body language, what McConnell's theory of body language is, or how it is that the 'sentences' of ballet convey meaning. What she does offer at the very end of the book is that "if the viewer familiarizes himself with the alphabet of ballet, he will be able to form words and sentences. Then he will be able to 'read' what he sees" (p. 156). But there is nothing in the book which explains how the jump from visual recognition of steps will lead to 'understanding' of the body language, unless she means to imply that if one can recognize steps, one 'understands' the

idiom. It becomes clear, finally, that the messages which the author considers primary to the idiom are the literal stories of narrative ballets such as The Sleeping Beauty or The Prodigal Son, or 'abstract' messages in "pure dance ballets, like Ballet Imperial or Movements for Piano and Orchestra" (p. 156). This seems to be the level of understanding with which she is concerned. Following this line of thought, one might expect that a seven-year-old who knows the English alphabet, can form a substantial number of essential English words, and can put them together into proper sentences, 'understands' English, or could 'understand' Alice in Wonderland at any level beyond the simple story of a young girl who falls down a rabbit hole and has many exciting adventures. It takes awareness of different aspects of a spoken, musical or body language, its culture and cultural values before deeper levels of meaning can be understood and appreciated.

Elsewhere in the book are various statements which simply need factual correction. One is McConnell's assertion that "in 1959, Martha Graham helped Balanchine choreograph Episodes" (p. 48 -- underline supplied). Here she refers to eventual borrowing between ballet and modern dance idioms which grew as a result of a gradual acceptance each found in the other. In fact, according to Don McDonagh (1973) Episodes was to be a collaboration between the two artists. However, as Graham could never tolerate a second billing, the net result was that they worked separately, each with members of their own companies (except for the exchange of one soloist apiece), and the final product was a throwing together of sections by each. McDonagh states that "the contrast in styles between the dances of Graham and Balanchine were so great that it was hard to see the work as a collaboration ... the result was an inelegant hybrid". Furthermore, "Graham soon lost interest in her portion of the ballet and never included it in her repertory. Balanchine retained most of his portion for inclusion in the regular repertory of the New York City Ballet. He had created a strong solo for Paul Taylor, but, because he showed no interest in having anyone else do it, it was dropped. What remained, therefore, from the "collaboration" of the two major figures in American dance were fragments in the repertory of the ballet company and nothing whatsoever in Graham's active repertory" (McDonagh, 1973:258). However, McConnell is right to note the general shift towards an amalgamation of dance styles, in part, between ballet and modern dance. Her second example (Merce Cunningham's Summerspace for NYC Ballet) is more appropriate; Cunningham is a choreographer who broke away from Graham, and whose own emerging style was highly influenced by the balletic sense of 'line'.

She makes a generalization about modern dance, as well as a misapplication of terms, which must also be corrected. In a discussion of "muscle contrology" (the rehabilitative work of Carola Trier, which is based upon exercises developed by Joseph Pilates), she states that "most of the exercises involve working with or against springs -- a method that incorporates the "contract and release" principle of modern dance" (P. 55). First, only a few modern dance idioms formally use contraction and release as a fundamental principle for the generation of a movement vocabulary. The first and best known is Martha Graham Technique. Since then, many of her dancers have formed their own groups, many of which use the contraction and release: Merce Cunningham, Pearl Lang, Paul Taylor, Paul Sansardo and others. However, each of these dancers has changed the nature and use of contraction and release according to their own unique styles. On

the other hand, there are as many or more modern dance idioms which are based upon the "fall and rebound" principle of Doris Humphrey, or on other basic movement principles which have nothing to do with contraction and release: José Limón, Mary Wigman, Twyla Tharp, Pilobolus, Kei Takei, Anna Sokolow, to name only a few.

Second, the kind of contracting and releasing of muscles involved in the exercises of Carola Trier -- physiological, chemical changes occurring within groups of muscles at an extremely rapid pace -- have little or nothing to do with the contraction and release principle of modern dance idioms. For example, physiological muscle contraction is involved in a Graham release, as well as in the contraction. Here McConnell confuses the biological use of terms with a metaphorical use of terms adopted to make a theoretical statement. Graham herself has frequently said that the release is 90% contraction, and here she refers to the physiological contraction necessary to the metaphorical release.

It also concerns this reviewer that verbal descriptions of ballet steps might not be intelligible to a non-dancer, so defeating the expressed purpose of the book. Take, for example, the following description:

> "An important traveling terre à terre step is the glissade, or glide. In the glissade, first the working foot moves from fifth position in the desired direction, and then the supporting foot closes the movement." (p. 74)

This would mean virtually nothing to someone who (i) is not sure what a 'supporting' or 'working foot' is, (ii) does not know how the working foot moves from fifth position, (iii) has no familiarity with ballet's conception of weight change, or (iv) what 'closing a movement' is meant to be! So much is left out. Although elements of the ballet dancer's life-style and certain contextual aspects of the art aside from the technique itself are readily available to the layperson reading the book, it remains a puzzle why the title "Ballet as Body Language" was chosen when so little of that concept is adequately defined or conveyed with any general accessibility.

If space permitted, statements as to the universality of certain concepts (p. 60 regarding portrayals of death; p. 33 regarding the plié; p. 82 regarding leaps; and p. 78 regarding the 'sophisticated' nature of dance forms using turns on one foot) would be challenged. The author's observation that "there is an important limitation in all ballet instruction in the United States: it presents ballet only at the technical level, and ignores the background, the traditions and even the physiological reasons for body placement" (p. 153) would invite considerable discussion of the general status of dance in this country as a second or third class endeavour, or subject of serious study.

It may seem that this reviewer takes a dim view of making specialized information available to a wider public than that consisting of professionals in a field. Such is not the case,

however, it would be hoped that the theoretical concerns involved not be seen to be 'above the heads' of such a wider audience, and that the assumption not be made that any genuine appreciation of the subject could be gained by their elimination. Time and care must be taken in the translation of these fundamental ideas and, admittedly, the proposed task is a formidable one.

Diana Hart Johnson

NOTES

1. It would be of interest to anthropologists whether the lights appear vertically or horizontally, as it would interest anthropologists of human movement how movement in the ballet (or other dance) idiom is organized in relation to up/down, left/right, back/front or in/out.

2. For discussion of the finite nature of the set of theoretically possible human movements, see Williams 1976, 'Deep Structures of the Dance'.

3. For a more complete discussion of the paradigmatic/syntagmatic scale, kinemes, kinesemes and their use in semasiology, see Williams, 1980, 'The Human Action Sign and Semasiology' IN CORD.

4. For discussion of the notion of rules and grammaticality in dance idioms, see Puri, R. and Hart, D., 1982, IN JASHM, and Myers, E., 1981, IN JASHM.

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