

## IS DANCE POLITICAL MOVEMENT?\*

The Dilemma of Dance in Society

There are two opposing beliefs or views that are currently debated in South Africa amongst the dance community -- the one is that dance is political, whereas the contrary opinion is that dance occupies a separate domain and is in no sense connected to political matters. The adherents of the first view would argue that particularly in South Africa, but probably universally, dance or any form of cultural expression is inextricably interwoven into the socio-political, economic and even religious, fabric of peoples' lives. On the other hand, there are those who believe that politics and art should not be mixed (echoes of sport!) and that dance is solely a form of entertainment. It is often those in the society who have political power who support the idea that art (or dance) is not political, whereas those who do not have any political power support the converse idea.

Another way of conceptualising these two views is to ask whether art or dance mirrors life -- does it portray and magnify the realities of life, or does it represent an escape from reality or a fantasy world?

Terminology

Before continuing, certain terminology needs to be clarified. It is difficult to discuss dance in isolation, as it is often associated with other forms of performance art. The term 'art' is also problematic as it tends to suggest a domain or experience on a separate level of reality. I use the term 'cultural expression' which seems less exclusive. In indigenous African cultural forms of expression, dance and music are inextricably linked. The music is part of the dance and vice versa. Therefore, in discussing indigenous black South African forms of cultural expression, dance and music are referred to synonymously.

The word 'traditional' also needs to be clarified -- it is used to refer to that kind of South African dance which has its source in the rituals and rites of passage (birth, initiation, harvests, death, etc.) of the indigenous black South African rural population. These forms have undergone change due to interaction

\*This article is reprinted with kind permission from the editors of The Dance Journal, The School of Dramatic Art, Witwatersrand University, P.O. Wits, Johannesburg 2050, South Africa.

with neighbouring groups of rural people, as well as transformation as a response to migrant labour and proletarianisation.

### Defining 'Political' in Relation to Dance

If we are to discuss whether or not dance/music is 'political,' we need to establish in what sense the word 'political' is being used. The narrow or specific use of 'political' is connected with the state or government and its organisation at various levels. However, there is a diffuse or broader use, which the Concise Oxford Dictionary gives as "belonging to or taking sides in politics: relating to a person's or organisation's status or influence." It is the broader sense of 'political' that will be used in this article.

Erlmann points out that it is easy to dismiss the notion of music as political if one takes the narrow meaning of 'political,' which is to "communicate ideologies and specific ideas" (Erlmann, 1982:1), but that the broader political role of music lies in the notion that "aesthetics instigates the changed forms of consciousness needed to generate practical changes in society" (Erlmann, 1982:1). Blacking also sees a political function of music, as its performance "generates feelings and relationships between people that enable positive thinking and action in fields that are not musical" (Blacking, 1981:35).

These sentiments can be applied to dance in the same sense as to music in that it can act as a catalyst for political thought and action. However, I believe it is also political in the sense that attitudes toward dance, or aesthetic values relating to dance, are forged or influenced by the political actions and thinking at a particular time in history. Furthermore, the actual structure or form of dances and the way these forms are transformed is influenced by political actions and attitudes.

Although I argue that dance is political, I am not saying that dance is only political. The political aspect is one facet of the multitude of processes involved in dance formation and expression. This is not to ignore many other functions of dance, such as entertainment, recreation, individual aesthetic expression and social bonding, to mention but a few. This article is not an attempt to minimise the essential role that individual performers, teachers or choreographers play in creating new dance forms. Although individuals involved in the creative process may not be consciously politically motivated, yet their position in South African society has been politicised through processes such as colonialism and the apartheid system.

### Dance and Culture

Dance needs to be understood in relation to a broad view of culture. Culture is not only a set of symbols, values or beliefs

of people, but also a response to circumstances. These circumstances encompass not only the material or economic but also the socio-political activities of any group of people. The notion of culture should not be seen as a monolithic whole. Groups that exist within the same society to a certain extent share each others' cultures, but "just as groups are unequally ranked in terms of wealth and power, so cultures are differently ranked" (Clark, 1976:11). Even within the categories or 'classes' of culture there will be continuous flux and transformation. The conflict between classes is often fought at the level of culture, and cultural formations are often class-based. However, in South Africa, whereas one can conceptualise certain cultural formations such as dance/music as class-based to a certain extent, the concept of a class-based culture such as 'a working class culture' is complicated by black/white opposition and the whole historical process of colonisation.

### Colonialism

Colonial attitudes affected the extent and direction of cultural cross-fertilisation. The colonial settlers coming to South Africa brought with them their dances from Europe. Dance for these Europeans was a form of social communication or recreation and entertainment in the form of court or folk dances. For the indigenous black people dance and music was an integral part of their social, religious and political rituals and ceremonies. The dilemma posed earlier -- whether dance is separate from or integrated into other spheres of life -- was reflected in the different roles which dance occupied in the colonial and indigenous cultures respectively.

There was in the eighteenth century considerable cross-fertilisation between the colonists, the indigenous population and the slave population. Coloured musicians were very influential in forging a popular western Cape performance culture. While segregation was a matter of social class and not legislated, a continuous cultural exchange occurred between different groups of people. In the Western Cape during a period of about two hundred years, when segregation was customary, rather than legislated, a popular performance culture developed which was "based on Afrikaans and common to white as well as Coloured people" (Coplan, 1983:10-15). "Coloured" slave and freemen would perform on rural farms or country dances at official balls, as well as in "racially mixed seaside taverns and dancehall canteens" (Coplan, 1985:10).

The history of the dances, both social and theatrical, of the European settlers and their descendants in this country during the latter part of the nineteenth and twentieth century has been characterised to a large extent by its lack of adoption, absorption or adaptation of local indigenous black dance forms. In general, colonial attitudes, especially at the height of British imperialism, were characterised by disdain towards the culture and

traditions of the indigenous population. Darwin's theories of evolution reinforced the European attitudes of racial and cultural superiority. The culture of the indigenous black population was perceived as simple, undeveloped and generally on a lower level of 'civilization' than that of the European colonists. Their music and dance was seen as primitive and not worthy of understanding or emulation. These attitudes have persisted and are still to be found to this day.

The ethnocentrism of a large percentage of the dance community allowed them to see indigenous black dance as only 'repetitive' and 'boring', instead of learning to appreciate the structural subtleties, rhythmic complexity, intricate footwork, sudden shifts of weight and counterpoint of juxtaposed body parts. Johnny Clegg with Juluka and Savuku, AmaPonda and groups such as Ladysmith Black Mambazo, as well as shows such as "Serafina" have brought African music and dance to a wide white population, and this has helped to change attitudes, but there is a long way to go before inculcated prejudice is replaced by real knowledge and understanding.

On the positive side, during the past two decades there have been a small but growing number of choreographers and dance teachers in South Africa who have been working with non-racial dance groups and incorporating indigenous elements into their work.

#### Dance for Children and Dance Companies

Ballet became popular in England in the early part of this century and the colonies and dominions followed the fashion. Until recently ballet has been a predominantly elitist activity taught mainly to white children (or in the Cape to 'coloured' children as well). Since both education and residential areas have been segregated, the majority of South African children have not had access to ballet, modern, or other dance classes. Most of the syllabi taught by the various examining bodies in South Africa have been formulated without consideration of the cultural and socio-economic backgrounds of the majority of the children of this country.

When the state-subsidised ballet companies were formed in the early 1960's, they were modelled on western European prototypes. Although there were some forays into indigenous culture through the use of myths or stories, the form in which this material was expressed was still based on western aesthetic criteria.

One of the most obvious examples of how politics in this country has explicitly affected dance is the Separate Amenities Act. For over twenty years there were racially exclusive Performing Arts Councils and hence racially exclusive ballet companies. The Cape, which was always politically more liberal, had a ballet company which was not exclusively white. One of the first areas where the colour-bar was broken was in the state-controlled

institutions of the Performing Arts Councils. PACT's recently formed Dance Company (contemporary dance) could not have existed in its present form fifteen years ago because of politics and not because of artistic or financial considerations. It almost seems superfluous to point out that the cultural boycott has also affected the dance community, in particular the followers of modern dance.

### Dance and the Church

Under the colonial regimen, the missionaries were responsible for both the conversion and education of the indigenous black population. Most missionaries saw traditional dancing as part of the pagan rituals which they believed must be suppressed. The converted Christian black people who were 'forbidden' to dance in their customary way at communal occasions channeled their need for social musicalisation into Christian congregational singing (Coplan, 1985:29). Dance for these Christians became separated from their everyday social and religious life. For some time traditional African dancing became the preserve of the non-Christian black people.

However, in the early twentieth century, with the establishment of separatist African churches, not only were traditional musical structures introduced into hymn singing, but traditional style dances were used as a form of communal worship. The establishment of these separatist churches can be viewed as a form of political protest of black Christians against the totally western form of worship the missionaries imposed on them. Dance and music were an integral part of religious experience and were often the means through which trance-like states were reached whereby mediums could communicate with the ancestors. By re-introducing dance into worship, the African people were reaffirming the value of their cultural traditions (Blacking: 1981;37ff).

### Syncretic Forms of Cultural Expression

The formation of many syncretic indigenous music/dance forms in the slumyards, townships, hostels and compounds, which started in the last part of the nineteenth century and has continued until the present time, can be seen largely as a response to political actions as well as economic conditions. With the discovery of diamonds and gold, there was a demand for a plentiful supply of manual labour. Restrictive legislation culminating in the 1913 Land Act, together with the imposition of hut tax and natural disasters, resulted in a severe shortage of land and cash for rural black people. Migrancy became an increasing necessity for survival. The effect on dance was that not only did rural or traditional forms of cultural expression change through urban contact, but the new urban forms incorporated rural elements.

Although no attempt will be made to examine all these syncretic indigenous dance/music forms, a few will be discussed to show how they embody a complex set of values or messages which may include the political.

### Slumyards Give Birth to Marabi

The creation of a large number of crowded urban slumyards in Johannesburg in the early twentieth century was a result of restrictive legislation and poverty. Situated in these slumyards, the shebeens provided a source of income as well as a social meeting point. Regular week-end parties with music and dancing were an essential part of the shebeen. A new class of semi-professional shebeen musicians arose. Their music assimilated elements which included traditional African, Afro-western, Afrikaans, folk music, American ragtime and jazz into a single urban style called marabi. The marabi dance which could be performed alone or with a partner was not rigidly structured, but rather improvised, with the performers drawing on traditional African and western forms of dance.

Marabi became more than a form of music or dance; it became synonymous with the new culture that arose in the slumyards. This culture, including the dancing, grew out of a response to the deprivation and the exclusion of the black people. It is important to place this form of cultural expression in its total context. The shebeens were illegal, yet people continued to participate frequently in the marabi music and dancing. This marabi culture can be seen as an expression of resistance -- people saw no social stigma in going to jail as a result of raids during marabi parties at Shebeens. By being an integral part of the shebeen based marabi culture, dance can be seen to be a part of the "resistance to a cruel system" to which Themba refers (1972:108).

Marabi was not only a form of resistance, "it was also the desire of a largely un-schooled and un-westernised urban African to modernise by absorbing new cultural elements within a familiar structure" (Coplan, 1985:107). Here we can see how important it is to examine the location and the context of the dance in order to understand the full significance of its performance. It should not be forgotten that for many of the shebeen frequenters the marabi dance was a form of socialising, a way to meet people.

### Iscathamlya -- Many Messages

Iscathamlya developed out of many other forms of music/dance, including traditional Ngoma songs and dances, Zulu wedding songs and dances, Christian hymnody, and American minstrel and ragtime music/dance. It is the very diversity of these sources that enables Erlmann to demonstrate how Iscathamlya or its predecessor mbube could express or contain within it such diverse messages as working-class consciousness, urban status, Christianity, rural

nostalgia, pan-ethnic African nationalist ideology and Zulu nationalism (Erlmann, 1987:2).

Iscathamlva competitions were, and still are, popular with Zulu migrant workers of the industrial centres of Johannesburg and Durban. The way that a particular group danced or sang was a way of identifying that group by members of that group and members of other groups. The groups could compete in weekly competitions against each other or they could perform together to express their solidarity as black workers for organisations such as the Industrial and Commercial Unions. Whereas the traditional element in Iscathamlva has been seen by many as reactionary, Erlmann (1987) points out that the persistence of traditional elements could be an expression of opposition by the migrant workers to capitalism.

The actual characteristic Iscathamlva 'step' also developed as a response to social change; more specifically, to change of attire from rural to urban dress. As one of Erlmann's informants puts it, "This is where the 'step' comes from. The 'step' and ngoma are different. The difference is that the 'step' allows you to dance with a tie, a suit. ... But with ngoma you cannot perform it with a tie, wearing a suit" (Interview Mtshali, Erlmann, 1977:21).

#### Stick Fighting Transformed into Isishameni-Style Dancing

Clegg (1981) describes how traditional stick-fighting matches, in which the participants followed rules and no one was hurt, were changed into real life-destroying contests. In the Natal Midlands the appropriation of land and the resulting scarcity of this resource, as well as jobs, led to intense competition between traditional 'stick-fighting' districts. As an increasing number of people were killed by stick-fighting, another cultural response was needed, and it took the form of dance competitions. Many new dances were developed in the Isishameni style.

While the development of these dances and the competitions can be viewed as a response to social, political and economic factors, it should not be forgotten that they also provide entertainment and recreation to performers and onlookers, as well as a sense of sheer physical exuberance and well-being for the dancers. Dance can be created as a result of many factors, and it can have many functions.

#### Apartheid and Dance

The architects of apartheid saw cultures as bounded, fixed, homogeneous entities. They emphasized the differences between people and reified cultural traditions. The preservation of traditional cultures as discrete entities, frozen in time, was in keeping with their policy of racial exclusiveness. Tribalism or ethnicity was promoted as part of 'separate development'. Tribal dancing was seen as something that should be preserved in its pure

form and any signs of urban or western influence were seen as a form of cultural bastardisation (James, 1989).

As a reaction against government-enforced cultural differentiation and the policy of divide and rule, many of the opponents and victims of apartheid regarded any emphasis on cultural differentiation or ethnicity with suspicion. Terminology such as 'ethnic dance', 'tribal dance', or even 'traditional dance' has become an emotionally loaded concept. It is not only the words or terminology that have been affected. Cultural unity and solidarity are inevitably stressed, perhaps at times at the expense of diversification. Thus the variety of dance forms which are to be found amongst the different language groups have often not been valued in terms of their richness as a cultural heritage. On the one hand, we have white ethnocentrism and attitudes of cultural superiority, and on the other hand we have black suspicion of government promoted 'tribal' dance.

#### National and Regional Dance

National variations in folk-dance are universally found. For example, Italian dances differ from Slavonic dances -- the former have much more elevation than the latter, which have a downward quality or skim smoothly over the ground. Furthermore, within countries there are regional differences -- the dignified, controlled dances of the north of Italy, such as the Trescone or Furlana, differ from the dances of central Italy, such as the freer, more relaxed Saltarello, as well as from the fiery, passionate Tarantella of the south. Similar regional variations exist in South Africa -- the undulating, almost lyrical movements of the domba dance of Venda have different dynamics from the stamping, military-like movements of the 'umogonqa' style Zulu dances (Clegg, 1981:11).

To carry the cross-cultural analogy further, countries such as Poland, Russia, Spain, Israel and Senegal, which have strong dance traditions, have formed professional theatrical folk or 'national' dance companies, which tour throughout the world and have been enthusiastically received. It would seem that South African traditional indigenous dances with their wide variety of forms would provide ample material for an exciting professional folk dance company. Dances from all the regions could be included and theatricalised if necessary, so that one would not be promoting ethnicity in a divisive sense, but rather acknowledging the value of cultural diversity.

#### Dance and Protest Theatre

Protest theatre is undoubtedly political. Dance and music have been central to productions which have expressed the frustration and the anger, as well as the aspirations of the victims of apartheid, at venues such as the Afrika Cultural Centre,



FUBA, the Funda Centre and the Market Theatre in Johannesburg and the People's Space and Baxter Theatres in Cape Town. Movement and music were as important as the spoken word in productions such as Workshop 71's Crossroads, Maonya's Hungry Earth, Junction Avenue's Sophiatown, Manaka's Goree, the Dhloma Theatre Collective's Burning Embers, and Ngema's Sarafina, amongst many others.

### Dance as Non-Verbal Communication

The question is often asked how can dance, which is a non-verbal art, be political? It is precisely this characteristic which makes it a powerful tool of expression of an oppressed people. Dance and music can often express sentiments of opposition and resistance and the aspirations of people who are denied verbal or literary expression of these feelings.

Because of its non-verbal nature, dance can easily be ambiguous, so that ideas that may be censored in other media may be suggested or implied through dance. For example, in the Bambian Copperbelt the workers took part in regular recreational dances. As part of the kalela dance (Mitchell, 1956) they expressed their dissatisfaction with conditions in the mines and made insulting jokes about their white 'bosses'. This criticism was acceptable because of the ritual-like context of the dance.

### Conclusion

If there is still any doubt about the strong political element in dance, one needs to look no further than the recent protest marches and demonstrations. The toyi-toyi is a central part of political protest. Dance is not only an expression of political feelings, it can also influence the perceptions of the participants and viewers, and contribute to transforming socio-political systems. In South Africa, where you dance, whom you dance with, what kind of dances you do, and your attitude toward dance will say something about you as a political being, as well as a performer or 'artist'. This is not an attempt to reduce dance to politics, but rather to acknowledge that it is an integral part of the socio-political, economic and religious life of people, as well as a cultural or recreational phenomenon. As the country and its politics become normalised, one would expect dance to become de-politicised. As ethnocentrism gives way to a real openness and willingness to understand and appreciate, so will suspicion give way to cooperation and collaboration in the dance community. Dance not only reflects the society, but it can also mould society.

Sylvia Glasser  
Johannesburg

## REFERENCES CITED

- Blacking, J. 1981. "Political and Musical Freedom in the Music of Some Black South African Churches." In The Structure of Folk Models (L. Holy and M. Stucklik, Eds.) ASA Monograph 20, London.
- Bloch, M. 1974. "Symbols, Song, Dance and Features of Articulation: Is Religion an Extreme Form of Traditional Authority?" In Archives Europeennes Sociologiques 14.
- Bozzoli, B. 1983. "History, Experience and Culture". In Town and Countryside in the Transvaal (B. Bozzoli, Ed.) Johannesburg: Ravan.
- Clarke, et al. 1976. "Subcultures, Cultures and Class." In Resistance Through Rituals (S. Hall and T. Jefferson, Eds.) Hutchinson.
- Clegg, J. 1983. "Towards an Understanding of African Dance: The Zulu Isishameni Style." Papers presented at the Second Symposium on Ethnomusicology. ILAM.
- Coplan, D. 1982. "The Emergence of an African Working-Class Culture." In Industrialism and Social Change in South Africa (S. Marks and R. Rathbone, Eds.) London.
- Coplan, D. 1985. In Township Tonight. London: Ravan.
- Denisoff, S. 1968. "Protest Movements: Class Consciousness and the Propaganda Song." Sociological Quarterly 9:228-47.
- Erlmann, V. 1982. "Black Political Song in South Africa -- Some Research Perspectives." Popular Music Perspectives 2.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1987. "Singing Brings Joy to the Distressed." History Workshop, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.
- Hall, S. and T. Jefferson. 1976. Resistance Through Rituals. London: T. Hutchinson.
- James, D. 1989. "Research on African Music in South Africa." Briefing for the Radical History Review, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.
- Koch, E. 1983. "Without Visible Means of Subsistence." In Town and Countryside in the Transvaal (B. Bozzoli, Ed.) Johannesburg: Ravan.
- Mitchell, J.C. 1956. The Kalela Dance. Rhodes Livingstone Papers, No. 28.

- Modisane, B. 1963. Blame On Me History. Johannesburg: A.D. Donker.
- Themba, C. 1972. The Will To Die. South Africa: D. Philip.
- Van Onselen, C. 1982. "Randlords and Rotgut." In Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand, Vol. 1: New Babylon.