

FILM AND BOOK REVIEW

The Longest Trail. A film by Alan Lomax and Forrestine Paulay. 1988. 16 mm., color. Companion handbook, 39 pp. Available in video format from University of California Extension Media Center, 2176 Shattuck Avenue, Berkeley, Ca. 94704.

The Longest Trail is the fourth in a series of films. The introductory footage includes signature dance clips and the statement, "The Choreometrics Project of Columbia University Presents Rhythms of Earth: A Global Anthology of Dance Seen in Cross-Cultural Perspective." The concept and clips are exciting!

Then -- "This Episode of Rhythms of Earth Explores the Arctic Background of North and South American Indian Dance Style," referring to the film under review. That statement moves away from anthology to an allegation, and excitement changes to concern.

Dances in cross-cultural perspective have their own merit. The flower of all cultures is dance. To be able to see the dances of many cultures, one after the other, exhilarates, and teaches more about the varieties and importance of dance and dancers, and the inventiveness of human beings than any narrative.

Lomax's vision of bringing together clips of dances from all over the world is monumental. That he has been able to do this is amazing. The panorama that unfolds is magical. But to adapt an old metaphor, Lomax gives with his right hand and takes with his left. The vision, amazement and magic are crushed by the dreadful narration that Lomax overlays.

I, too, have a vision -- in four parts. They pertain to these films, handbooks, scholarly writing and discourse, and the choreometrics data base.

First, the films should be re-issued as a real anthology, shown without any voice-over, the only audio the music and ambient sounds that are part of each dance (and dance only) event. Introductory titles for each clip will identify (1) the culture and people, (2) location, (3) occasion, and (4) date of event.

The handbooks will document the films but not include theories and analyses. Original filmmakers will be matched

with the dance clips, and each original film from which the clip was extracted will be documented. The original filmmakers will contribute statements about the context and circumstances of the filmed event. There will be two sets of bibliographies for each clip -- one for the original film and filmmaker, and one for the culture represented. The handbooks will promote understanding by lay persons and be resources for scholars.

Part three of my version is about new publications from the choreometrics laboratory. Paulay will write a book that will teach choreometrics techniques with cross-references to the films. In addition, Paulay, Lomax and others will write scholarly papers that present theories and hypotheses for professional meetings and journals. Not just closed reports, they will elicit discussion and debate.

Finally, the choreometrics data base will be re-thought and restructured, especially as to selection and interpretation of data. Advisors will be selected who will know both anthropological theory and dance, and who will devote the attention that the project demands.

With these four revisions Lomax, et al., will make great contributions to cross-cultural studies of dance. For now, however, the films, including The Longest Trail, are shocking travesties.

The thesis of The Longest Trail is that Native Americans move their bodies in hunter/gatherer "Arctic style." The alleged forebears of contemporary Native Americans crossed the Bering Straits with primordial movement patterns encoded by their hunting/gathering activities and Arctic environment. The pervasive movement style, we are informed, was a heat conserving physiological adaptation to cold climates (Handbook, p. 6). Without explanation, the handbook claims, also, that Native Americans dance with their bodies "bouncing vertically in the moderate trajectories common in much of the tribal Pacific," p. 6).

As the descendants of the Bering Straits migrators continued to relocate through the Americas, their primordial movement styles went with them. This retention is presumably ongoing today, even in non-Arctic environments, regardless of profound cultural, linguistic, and biological variations that do not resemble any aspect of the Arctic, and in spite of the passage of thousands of years.

The implication is that an initial response to the environment, once embodied, is never lost even to the nth generation, that environmental determinism is more powerful

than human creative adaptation. The logical conclusion is that Native Americans who live near the equator perform maladaptive dance styles because their dance behavior is appropriate to cold weather.

Presumably, also, no matter the economic endeavors today, the hunting/gathering movement prototypes are permanent in body memory. If true, all people everywhere display hunting/gathering style.

In order to measure dance movement styles, the choreometric team developed a set of indices and a handbook for the film, and Lomax attempted to demonstrate the findings in a 58 minute film of examples from 35 Native American groups. This collage should restrict the visuals to dance movements, only. Context, thus eliminated from the film, should nevertheless inform the analyses and be encapsulated in the handbook with bibliographic references for each of the 35 groups. That responsibility was not fulfilled.

Without any expressed rationale for their inclusion, the film clips show numerous irrelevant non-dance sequences. One wonders about the inclusion of clips of a four-year-old Cuna girl learning to serve beer to an elder, and Oyanas of Surinam's ritual ordeal of being bitten by ants. Rather than advancing the thesis of the film, the extraneous materials produce predictable ethnocentric shock from the film audiences. The handbook assures that the scenes were "carefully chosen and edited ... which our computer summaries advised us" (p. 13)! But Lomax seemingly decided to feed anything to his computer that intrigued him whether or not it was appropriate.

Lomax seems to use samples of non-dance items to advance his diffusionist theory. For instance, the hieratic figures of Navajo ritual sand paintings have an "Arctic style" because they have rigidly upright, unarticulated trunks. (What happened to the "Arctic crouch"?) He claims, also, that some Panamanian Indian carvings with straight columnar figures are evocative of Navajo sand paintings, and that they, too, have "Arctic roots." It may be useful to note that Navajo sand paintings are sprinkled on flat ground while the Panamanian Indian carvings are three-dimensional and stand upright; the two forms are not co-equivalent. In my opinion, the Panamanian Indian carvings resemble those from parts of the Pacific. In any case, they do not resemble Eskimo carvings that are rounded and dynamic. Eskimos don't carve in "Arctic style."

The film and handbook correlations are confusing, especially after the first few entries, and the content is

at variance as well. To give but one example, Lomax announces that particular Andean men wear "homespun woolens" and have "hats like Spanish helmets," but in the handbook those men wear "thick, woolen, helmet-like hats ... of the type worn by boxers in Incan times."

According to the handbook the area covered by the film is Alaska through Argentina, so it is surprising to see clips from Siberia and the Ainu of Japan. Characteristic of Lomax's out-of-context declarative statements, he announces that the Pueblos are "influenced by Mexican civilization," whatever that means, and the Hopis have a South American connection. Lomax should know that the Pueblos are a collection of tribes, a culture area, and not a single tribe. The Hopi are a Pueblo tribe. The non-Hopi Pueblos are located to the east of Hopi and not to the west as indicated on the handbook map.

I am compelled to mention the Hopi Butterfly dance sequence. Lomax confides that the boy "may kiss his partner in public without reproach." Not so! The handbook suggests a Hopi/South American connection and references one of my articles. Nothing in my article indicated that boys kiss their partners in public, nor a Hopi/South American connection. The faulty treatment of the Hopi, who are but one of the 35 groups represented in the film and handbook, suggests that other cultures and other authors are misrepresented as well.

Twice in the film Lomax suggests a Malaysian influence. In one instance he finds a "hint of Malaysia" in the way the paddlers "handle canoes" along the Orinoco River. Malaysia along the rainforest of Amazonia? In 1933 Goldenweiser articulated the "doctrine of limited possibilities" -- a message that should inform Lomax and urge him to consider "independent inventions."

Lomax's observations carry outrageous implications. He comments on the Amazonian men who blow horns "like blowguns." It is evident that they do not blow them like blowguns. Do blowguns have a horn analogue? Or conversely, do societies with long horns or flutes use blowguns? The answer is no to both. In any case, horns and flutes and blowguns have nothing to do with "Arctic style." Nevertheless, Lomax insists on a "persistence of Arctic models in the jungles of South America."

As with other choreometrics films, Lomax's narration is unruly. Although backed by prestigious organizations and some academicians, he abuses their trust. How can his anthropologist colleagues, Columbia University, and funding agencies be gulled into thinking that Lomax's work is

scientific or scholarly? Perhaps they are dazzled by his jargon and never really read his conclusions.

To my knowledge, only reviewers who do not know dance grab favorably at Lomax's choreometrics work. Others have praised Lomax's use of statistics and computers. Nevertheless, sophisticated statistics and computers are only as reliable as the data they process.

Perhaps positive reviewers are overwhelmed by the huge numbers of cultures that Lomax taps. In the annals of dance research only Curt Sachs tried to cover as many groups all at once. Sachs's diffusionist theories were out-moded when his book, The World History of Dance, was published in 1937. Lomax uses this discredited approach, shamelessly, fifty years later. Even more than Sachs, Lomax selects data to support his hypotheses.

Obviously unschooled in anthropological theory, Lomax may not realize how naive his work is. In the entire field of American anthropology, Lomax is an anomaly. His anthropologist advisors do not serve Lomax or anthropology by tacitly approving his work.

Dance anthropologists in the United States fault rather than praise Lomax. The field of dance anthropology, a new, small field that welcomes additions to its ranks, eagerly seeks new data and methods, and encourages the development of a body of literature and audio-visuals. Of course, they encourage sound scholarship, also. Dance anthropologists reject Lomax's data, theories, and conclusions. They distance themselves from Lomax because of his carelessness and arrogant disregard for the criticisms offered by those of us who might otherwise be his colleagues. Dance scholars are especially alarmed by Lomax's work because the foundations for choreometrics were laid by the much respected late Irmgard Bartenieff.

Three things that I objected to in the first choreometrics film, Dance in Human History, are only half addressed in the film under review. First, although credits are now easy to read, filmmakers are not identified with their contributing films. That is significant. Lomax did not make the films from which the clips are extracted, and the original justifications for the films are unknown to viewers. Second, although the film and handbook nominally mention differing gender movements and whether dances are performed by soloists or groups, the importance of these variations is not made clear. Lomax acknowledges, finally, that changes take place throughout time (I should hope so, since there have been persons in the Americas for, plus or

minus, 20,000 years), but he does not incorporate the dynamics of culture change.

Lomax's choreometrics films, of which The Longest Trail is the most recent, are welcome for two reasons. The first is to be able to view dance visuals that were previously unavailable. The second, I am sorry to write, is to use Lomax's treatments of the visuals to teach students what not to do. The film is entertaining for casual viewers, if they do not pay close attention to the narration.

Note to Alan Lomax -- please consult your vision and good heart to correct this sorry state of affairs, and allow us to be proud of your work. I, for one, would love to be able to write positive reviews of your future work; of your past work, too, if you re-issue the films and handbooks appropriately.

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