Review Essay

Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture. **Cynthia J. Novack.** Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990. xvii + 258 pp. including illustrations, index and bibliographical references. Hardback Edition $30.00. ISBN 0-0991-2440-1. Paperback $14.95. ISBN 0-0991-2441. Reviewer: **Marjorie Franken.**

Cynthia Novack has done something original in this book, and one hopes it signals the beginning of a new wave of studies of dances and dancing in America. She has suggested new methodologies and paradigms, which, even if not fully realized or pushed to their analytical limits, are a breath of fresh air. One hopes other dance scholars will be inspired to follow her lead.

Novack chronicles the rise, spread and decline of contact improvisation and more important - tries to set it into the framework of the cultural and political events that occurred in the late 1960s and 1970s in American society. She has examined a small group of practitioners, performers and proselytizers of an innovative dance genre as a sub-sub-culture, within the very specialized (not to say 'precious') world of American art dance.

The author says, "Understanding dance in America requires an understanding of the intertwining of social life and aesthetic concepts" (p. 232). The effort to see a theatrical dance genre as a product of wider cultural forces is a much-needed perspective on dancing in America and one more step toward incorporating dances into the subject matter of anthropology as just another social activity, finally ridding they dance of the mystique that has heretofore prevented rigorous analysis and sustained interest in it in anthropology.

To describe the America of the '60s and '70s, certain catchwords come to mind: 'change', 'protest', 'demonstration' and 'activist'. Novack shows how the noble ideals from the larger society also operated within the sub-cultures of American dancers. Contact improvisation "signifies the struggle throughout the '60s to create alternative organizations for dance, both socially and artistically..." (p. 232). Specifically, Novack compares the structure and conventions of ballet and contact improvisation. The latter is characterized by these features:

1) duets are not always heterosexual pairs,
2) narratives, especially those pertaining to romantic love, are absent,
3) costumes are not a code for social status and role,
4) the focus is not on the shape formed by dancers' bodies, and
5) the social values portrayed are the antithesis of courtly ballet (p. 125).

All of these are amply (perhaps too amply) illustrated with photographic plate after plate of "great moments" in the history of contact improvisation. Dancers will presumably relate to and revel in this celebration and documentation of creativity and expression.

While few of the references, names, dates and performances resonate with this reviewer - a non-member of the circumscribed world that Novack celebrates - I am sure they are powerful referents for at least some dancers. Novack is at her best in my opinion when she speaks as an insider about how contact improvisation was a rebellion within the theatrical dance world. She says

> [D]ancers and choreographers must compete against each other at almost every level - for a teacher's or choreographer's attention, for teaching and performing jobs, for grant money and for critical attention and favor (p. 211).

She demonstrates that contact improvisation began as a protest against this system. The founders strove to be "non-hierarchical" and "democratic" (p. 125), operating as a sort of "egalitarian meritocracy" (p. 207). These ideals were achieved by open "jams", informal classes, communal living/dancing groups, and most of all by the non-authoritative, non-possessive, ambivalent leadership style of the principle founder, Steve Paxton.

But the book fails when the author tries to make the leap *beyond* the world of theatrical dance. Novack says that "The model for the social organization of contact improvisation existed in the organization of social movements in the '60s" (p. 207), but specifically what those movements were (feminism?, civil rights?, anti-war protests?, Native American rights?) and what the structural units of their organizations were is never explained. The closest the author gets is when she remarks, "During this period of time, collective and communal living situations were somewhat common among many middle-class young adults" (p. 194).

> Contact improvisation began as a 'folk' dance of largely unattached mobile young middle-class people for whom a community of shared interests in the responsive body and egalitarian interaction was, at least for a while, a perfect vehicle for social life (p. 206).

I have no doubt that what Novack believes is true. That is, a younger generation of dancers with egalitarian ideals and experimental ideas modeled their protest against the hierarchy within the dance world after the protest movements in the larger society. Unfortunately, *believing* something is not the same as proving that it is so.

Where is a group from the larger American society that is compared to contact improvisation point-by-point from inception to ideals, growth, change and finally decay? As one reads, one longs for Novack to pick a group - any group - from the 1960s and show us the similarities to contact improvisation. Several possibilities come to mind: the Hare Krishnas and/or Rajeesh communities, the Weather Underground, even the Deadheads!

Previous historically documented American experiments in utopian living and working groups would also make fascinating comparisons; the Oneida community or Shaker groups, perhaps. Non-American groups also come to mind, for example, the Sufi dervish dancers of Turkey and others. However, Novack mentions, but passes over, other movement fads in the United States of the same period, i.e. disco-dancing and aerobics. These activities would make fascinating comparisons, and so would "slam-dancing". Unfortunately, Novack never picks a group for such detailed comparison, thus the framework behind the palimpsest of contact improvisation remains vague, shadowy and mythical instead of evolving into a vital ethnographic comparison. In the end, Novack has produced a "dancers' book" that chronicles the history of a particular short-lived genre.

Cynics might say, "so what?" and their point would be well taken - if Novack weren't an anthropologist. Because she is, one can say that her work falls far short of fulfilling the anthropological ideal of social theory extracted from cross-cultural comparison. The "culture" of a small segment of the dance world *does* emerge, but a comparable group of young, radical innovators in other sub-cultures in America also responding to the political conditions of the 1960s never appears.

To this reviewer, Novack seems to inflate her account of contact improvisation by characterizing

1. "Contact improvisation, as the *embodiment* of a political period"...(p. 232 - italics added), and by pointing out that
2. "Contact improvisation was changing from an artistic experiment with dance to a social movement"...(p. 196). She sees it as an emblem of an era, saying that
3. "By 1985, the contact improvisation movement was transformed so that it hardly constituted a movement anymore...Perhaps developments like these truly mark the end of the '60s" (p. 213).

The relatively tiny world of contact improvisation which we are told constitutes "between a thousand and two thousand people nationally" (p.206) hardly comprises a "social movement", nor, as a peripheral branch of a comparatively narrow elitist profession, can such a small group of people participating in what, for the majority, is a marginal activity, serve as a

barometer of American society, except, perhaps, to those intimately involved in it. It is because of these kinds of things I conclude that Novack is only interested in informing other dancers about a recent period of American dance history. She says,

> Contact improvisation, because it emphasized communality to a greater degree than other dance forms and because it overtly symbolized social values...[is] the embodiment of a political period, the '60s (pp. 205 and 232).

What she seems to see in colliding, rolling, tumbling bodies is democracy, egalitarianism and individual creativity. What I see in the over-abundant photographs in her book is chaos, clumsiness, sparring matches between puppies, and goofy football games without points.

Rolling over a partner on the floor doesn't symbolize egalitarianism anymore than standing on one's toes symbolizes femininity or nobility, unless, of course, one is an initiate into a sub-culture where such meanings are learned and internalized.

A member of another culture (or even a member of some other group in the same culture) might see quite another meaning in contact improvisation, e.g. war?, inept sex?, or the struggles of the blind. Novack speaks from within the sub-culture of contact improvisation which in itself, is O.K., but she lost the larger anthropological perspective, which to this reviewer, isn't acceptable, since she writes as an anthropologist.

Novack's writing is impressive when she discusses the sub-culture of contact improvisation and "the pedestal position" of dance in both the public and scholarly minds.

> Dance occupies a peculiar position in American culture, at once marginal and compelling. The subject intrigues people, and some of their fascination results from a conception of dance as an exotic activity about which little is known and little can be known. This view is reinforced by the almost complete absence of reference to dance within the literature on American culture and art...The marginalization of dance happens in all kinds of actions, ranging from the lack of cultural analysis of dance to the difficulty of making a living as a dancer in America (p. 229).

In this book, Novack makes an admirable effort to fill the void, bridge the prejudices and de-mystify dance. She is at her best when she speaks as an insider of the American theatrical dance world. Her book could be seen as a definitive history of contact improvisation, but, as an anthropological account of a social activity it is less successful.

One hopes that Novack will continue to write: perhaps making comparisons to other youth-inspired rebellions with their innovative

experiments in expression, belief, communal living and interpersonal behavior, many of which blossomed in the ferment of the 1960s and 1970s.

The nitty-gritty of detail that would support her thesis about the relationship between dance forms and society is there waiting. The nature of dancing, dance forms and their various relationships to the wider cultures in which they exist is a principal theoretical issue in the sub-field of the anthropology of dance and human movement studies.

Novack has written her 'overture', so to speak, and anthropological scholars of the dance await the full development of each of her themes in succeeding 'movements'.