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PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUES OF DANCE HISTORY

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The exploding interest in dance history presents many challenges, theoretical and practical, to the scholar, but one of the least explored is the philosophical dimension of dance history. Philosophy involves a "stepping back" from the day-to-day business of an enterprise to gain additional perspective and reflection on underlying assumptions, values, and methodologies.[1] Philosophers don't conduct empirical research, but instead analyze, from a special philosophical perspective, work of practitioners in other fields. Philosophers try to make explicit underlying assumptions; they scrutinize key concepts; they ask questions about reasoning processes. Philosophy is thus a special methodology of analysis as much as it is any particular subject matter. There is philosophy of religion, of science, of social science, of art, and so on. I propose quite simply that dance history needs a philosophy of dance history.

What is the purpose of dance history? What is its proper subject matter? the basic issues? appropriate and justifiable methodologies? What constitutes adequate evidence for conclusions in dance history? Answers are less important than that these questions be asked and a continuing philosophical dialogue develop in response by historians and philosophers of dance. Only a few years ago, Selma Jeanne Cohen noted, about dance scholarship generally, that researchers ". . . frequently come up with conclusions of the utmost naivete -- not knowing what questions to ask, not realizing that insufficient evidence has been accumulated.[2] Indeed, too much dance history seems

based on the naive assumption that history is something lying in wait under intellectual stones, just waiting to be uncovered. For the field to develop in credibility and academic rigor, and for dance historians to move beyond mere "data-gathering," philosophical reflection is needed on the nature of the enterprise of dance history itself.[3]

What is the purpose of dance history? Leaving aside the satisfaction of curiosity, which underlies all intellectual enterprise, one obvious purpose is simply better understanding of the present and the future. If we know where we've been, perhaps we will better understand where we are and where we are going. But <u>why</u> does this knowledge of the past improve our knowledge of the present? We must dig somewhat deeper into the underlying assumptions of historic research

One such assumption is that history, like science, can and should discover general laws, relationships between causes and effects presumed to exist throughout time. If X, then Y, whether in the 16th century or the 20th. Many dance historians seem to be looking for such universal generalizations, at least implicitly. What are the causes of creative genius? What circumstances produce great choreographers and dancers? What values of the broader social context result in the popularity of certain dance forms and not others? What types of educational environments encourage great artists and good audiences? The assumption is that if we understood the functioning of those causal relationships in the past, we could make predictions for the future and better plan, say, the

education of dancers and choreographers. The complexity of the world and the seemingly endless variations in detail might seem to make impossible such identifications of simple cause and effect relationships, but this is also a problem in the "hard" sciences. The social sciences, dealing with complex human beings, also assume that such causal relationships exist and might be discovered. It is thus at least reasonable to assume that historians might discover such causal relationships.

Such theories or generalizations in history not only make prediction possible, but also provide a theoretical perspective which structures otherwise random bits of information and allows us to explain something in terms of those theories. A random collection of facts is useless, until structured, explained, and brought under a conceptual umbrella. One might theorize, for example, that unusual periods of creativity and innovation in dance follow upon similar developments in other artforms, but that dance rarely takes the lead in such creative artistic trends (e.g., "Romanticism"). This may or may not be true, but it is the sort of hypothesis that would lead to considerable understanding of, say, the relationship of dance to other artforms, the sources of artistic creativity and ingenuity, and the conditions which could be expected to encourage more creativity in the future. It is one thing to look for historical facts about the original La Sylphide; it is something else to understand why those particular facts are being sought. Facts might be sought to

study or "test" an endless array of hypotheses regarding, say, the emerging use of toe shoes and the resulting changes in technique, the social factors causing a shift toward Romanticism in ballet, the use of written notation in the early nineteenth century, critical standards for the relationship between movement and music, accepted changes in choreography by the performer and identity standards generally, training and rehearsal routines, and so on. Different facts are sought depending on what one is trying to prove. The same data will mean different things depending on the theory one is investigating. More comprehensive theories need to be developed in dance history to provide these analytical perspectives and sets of hypotheses. These theories should explain, clarify, and crystallize otherwise disparate and random collections of facts. They should guide research by helping to identify what sorts of empirical data are needed, and what methodologies of research are most urgently and appropriately needed.

Another approach to history is rejection of the possibility of general laws, which amounts to the claim that historical events are unique and unrepeatable, with no regular, consistent, causal relationships. If this claim is true, no predictions can be made of the future, nor can lessons from the past be applied to the present. Creation in dance would be purely a function of geniuses which appear quite independently of social context, training, or whatever. If this view of history is accurate (and it is a respectable view), what then is the function of dance history? Several functions can still

be identified (some also consistent with the theory that the function of history is primarily the discovery of general laws). For example, dance historians describe, from different perspectives, with different purposes, and different vocabularies, what happened in the past, and thus increasingly clarify and expand our understanding of what happened. Even if there are no general laws, such descriptions are important exercises in learning how to describe events, people, and circumstances. The process of learning how to describe the past is useful in the effort to describe the present, for methodologies are timeless. For a young (or, at least, only recently-appreciated) and non-verbal artform such as dance, learning how to describe events and works is essential for better description of the present. The wealth of material from the past diversifies the subjects to be described and the experience of describing.

Description of historical works has a special importance in dance, because particular choreographic works exist through an indefinite period of time. Preservation, revival, and restoration of historical works requires research into the choreography, music, and so forth of earlier productions. To assist in the preservation of works, supporting historical research is needed into methods of notation, sketching, standards of accuracy with those written records, technique (did an arabesque in 1830 look exactly like an arabesque today?) and so forth.

Works themselves are one important subject of dance history, but there are others, of varying importance. Much dance history

seems to have been focused on the careers of individuals (creators, performers, teachers, audiences), schools, and companies, with attempts to document every possible detail about such particulars. A different approach is focus on particular actions of individuals (say, the creation of a particular work by a choreographer) for the purpose of clarifying the broader context within which the work was created. But a subject which seems to have received much less attention is the larger-scale social context within which dance has been created, performed, and appreciated. Historians should not just gather facts, but interpret and explain them, and place them in every-larger contexts of social phenomena.

For example, one might hypothesize that dance flourishes in a culture that has recently undergone exhausting political turmoil, such as war or revolution, and declines in popularity when political activism enjoys a resurgence among the general population. This sort of hypothesis requires a particular type of research, including study of the broader social context of different periods in dance history. The hypothesis also provides an important tool in explaining the current popularity of dance, and provides some grounds for prediction of future activity in dance.

So far we have pondered the purposes and subject matters of dance history. A different sort of philosophical issue is whether dance history can be objective, and what "objectivity" means in this field. It might be argued, for example, that the aesthetic and moral values of dance historians

necessarily distort the way they pursue and perceive historical information. Or, it might be argued that a pure, value-free terminology and methodology is as possible for history as it (allegedly) is for science. The fact that much of the subject matter of history involves people does not make it necessarily "subjective," any more than the work of sociologists and psychologists is necessarily subjective. It could also be argued that pristine "objectivity," devoid of any distortion by the researcher, is not possible, but that it can be recognized and factored into the analysis, for example, by focusing attention on the underlying assumptions and values of the researcher and analyzing how those might color the analysis of data. Examples of such assumptions and values might include the belief that toe shoes are "unnatural" or that goodness in a dance performance is a function of discipline, or expressiveness, or moral truth, or novelty, and so forth. Recognizing the presence of such biases and values, if they exist, would aid in understanding why certain topics are of interest, why certain causes for explanation are singled out, why individual actions are characterized in certain ways and not others. Researchers could try to identify these underlying premises and biases, both in their own work and in the work of others.

Many other philosophical questions need to be addressed. How are "general laws" in dance history verified, corroborated, or proved? Precisely how can these laws be used for prediction of future behavior? What is a "fact" in dance history? How

is historical knowledge proven? What evidence is sufficient for a justifiable belief? The ripeness of dance history for such philosophical discussions reflects both its youthful vigor and its increasing intellectual sophistication.

NOTES

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For introductory accounts of the nature of philosophy, see Monroe C. Beardsley and Elizabeth Lane Beardsley, Philosophical Thinking: An Introduction (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1965), pp. 1-17; John Passmore, "Philosophy," The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 1967, VI, 216-36. For an introductory account of philosophy for dance educators and theoreticians, see David Best, Philosophy and Human Movement (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1978), esp. pp. 3-25.

2

"The State of Sylphs in Academe: Dance Scholarship in America," in Growth of Dance in America, edited by Edward Kamarck (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin-Extension, 1976), p. 224.

3

For an introduction to the philosophy of history generally, see W. H. Dray, "Philosophy of History," The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 1967, VI, 247-54.