

WHAT IN THE NAME OF DANCE ARE YOU COUNTING ?

By John Cass

"Everybody is counting" is the first line of a Gertrude Stein poem, which comments on materialistic society, where all life is approached through quantitative measurement. This is obvious in questions of money: "How much did it cost?" and "What is his worth?" Less obvious, but also frequently heard, are the number of a man's years, of a woman's kilograms, of hours of class attendance, of the distances travelled on vacation, of the grades in a Bagrut examination. Perhaps these numbers have some relevance - but they don't really tell us much about personality, pleasure, learning or experience - in short, about the real stuff of life.

In dance (you knew that we would get there eventually!), it is especially distressing to find everybody counting. And I am talking both about the dry "one-two-three-four" and about the measurement of pirouettes, of extensions, of jumps, that figure so much in classes. They represent a quantitative emphasis that seems to me most objectionable in an art form. My concern is dance teaching, specifically for the layman—although these remarks can be applied to professional classes and occasionally even to performing groups. Statistics show that the number of Israeli children - and even amateur adults - studying dance, is constantly increasing. What are they actually learning? Personal observation and inquiry lead me to the conclusion that they are mostly learning technique. As a corollary, they are often short-changed in the coin of artistry. (Please note the word "often". Not "always", because there are many exceptions. The intention here is not to criticize an entire group of conscientious, hard-working professionals, but to set forth a point of view about dance education.) To switch the metaphor from money to nutrition: the diet offered the dance student is not always well balanced. He subsists mostly on technical care, and suffers a dietary deficiency of sensual, emotional and expressive nourishment.

The reason is, that everybody is counting — presenting dance as a branch of athletics, in which the content is skills that

must be measured. Treated this way, dance deserves to be included in physical education departments, quite separated from music, art and theatre, where we are always arguing that it belongs.

Permit me to set forth a more respectful view of dancing as an art, and to make some suggestions for teaching it.

Art in any medium offers sensual and emotional impressions of experience. In dance works, the medium is the motion of a human being who, alone or with others, forms stylized images of life. The dancer is a special performing artist who is both the instrument and the player. During years of lessons, his body assumes a harmonious shape, and is trained to execute well a great range of difficult movements. In this respect he does indeed resemble the athlete.

Skills are specific : jumps, beats, turns, balances. They can be measured and compared in terms of numbers: height of jumps, frequency of beats, number and speed of turns. This is the side in which the Israeli student is drilled, and in which he does in fact keep improving. If this were all there was to it, then dance would surely be a competitive sport. But technique is really just a means to an end. A dancer ought to be compared not to an athlete, but to a musician, because they resemble each other as performing artists. You would not approve if a child's entire piano training were to consist of exercises like scales and arpeggios, even though these build strong, flexible fingers. It is obvious that the purpose of strong, facile fingers is to achieve optimal control of the piano, so that the child can use it for producing music.

In dance, the student strives for technical mastery of his entire body, so that he can use it for producing dance images. He creates an instrument from his own being, and at the same time, is trained to play it. Certainly I agree that some technical proficiency is necessary even for the dancer's own satisfaction, let alone for the pleasure of his audience. Clumsy, blurred images and impressions (and unpleasant feelings for the performer) result from poor

technique. But good technique alone, only produces images of fine athletes or gymnasts, totally inadequate to the expressive possibilities of this art form.

The content in ballet and modern dance compositions moves over a wide range, into impressions, ideas and relationships of men and women, of landscapes, of peoples and their fate, as well as more or less abstract studies of shapes and lines, of tones and moods. In addition, a dance work is usually to some extent inter-dependent with musical accompaniment, and this also requires sensitivity and knowledge from the performer. In other words, to realize fully a piece of dance, the dancer needs to be skilled in interpretation as well as in technique. Interpretative needs vary with the work, from dramatic and emotional projection, to musical sensitivity, to a sensual understanding of movement in its rhythms, its shapes, and its dynamics. Actually this last quality — sensual understanding of movement, which is the very stuff of dance, should underlie all interpretive projection, whether it concerns a dramatic role, a visualization of music, or an abstraction of shapes and lines.

You easily recognize the presence or absence of this interpretive skill in a professional performer. Thus you characterize dancers as you do musicians: one is brilliant but dry; another a fine interpretive artist, but lacking slightly in virtuosity; another (quite rare!) combines fantastic virtuosity with great emotional depth. Seated in the audience, you are the judge, because the professional dancer is on the stage in order to communicate something to you, in order to bring you pleasure. Of course, if we are planning the education of a layman, he won't be judged by an audience, except occasionally by one made up of proud family and friends. He studies purely for his own pleasure and experience.

The central questions therefore becomes: does the dance class address itself only to technique, or does it try to impart understanding, feeling and enjoyment of movement-qualities required both for professional performance and for amateur enrichment?

In many instances, the answer must be "No!" Permit me to comment here on two teaching systems that are found in studios throughout our country: the Royal Academy of Dancing (R.A.D.) method in ballet; and the Martha Graham system in modern dance. They have very different histories

and goals, but they share some physical benefits for the faithful student, as well as some artistic shortcomings.

On the positive side, they will help him towards a body that has good overall tone, decent posture, a commendable shape, and a command of certain basic movement skills. On the negative side, barring a brilliant, unusual teacher, they will give him only the briefest glimpse of the mysterious language of artistic expression.

The R.A.D. provides an excellent, step-by-step blue-print for building the foundation of classic ballet. But because the style of ballet is limited, this means that the movement experiences of the student are limited. You may argue that the classic ballet style represents an idealization of human behaviour, and that someone trained this way can apply the technique as an all-purpose approach to works in any style. Agreed that it is an idealization, and a most appealing one — but it doesn't stand as a universal truth. It rather reflects the manners and standards of conduct in European courts from 1400 to 1700. Further, it is arguable whether even the talented professional can handle all choreographic statements with the tool of a ballet-trained body. But in any case, if we are talking about children and laymen, they won't get the chance. They will never be able to try out a composition by Jerome Robbins or John Cranko. What they don't get in class, they won't get — period! And what they do get in class is a formalized, narrow view of the human being.

As for the end-of-year recital, you know this generally means regimenting the class into a neat execution of a few standard steps to a piece of banal music.

Further, ballet technique teaches the student to present his body as a picture for an audience. The emphasis is on how the movement looks on him, rather than on how it feels to do. I maintain that this not only denies him full expression, it can be down-right negative in imparting a narcissistic involvement with his appearance in the mirror (and elsewhere!).

Finally, the R.A.D. method features an annual examination. Even when this doesn't lead to the same kink of tension that makes life a strain for the high school Bagrut

candidate, it still gives an unfortunate emphasis to the objective, testable material in dance, at the expense of the less easily defined, but crucial aspects of expression and experiment.

The Graham method, too, is open to the criticism of style limitation. Here is a human idealization of another kind—a view of a person as alternating between contracted gasps of pain and sorrow, and stretched releases of ecstasy. Again, it has its own kind of beauty, but it is not sufficiently universal to be an exclusive discipline. Unfortunately, Martha Graham's technique is almost synonymous with "modern dance" in certain circles both in and out of Israel. In reality, Graham's technique is very rigid, right from the opening floor bounces — not at all a basic, or free approach to movement. In addition to imparting a tense dynamism to their students. Graham teachers often narrowly insist on exact positions in all the exercises, so that the students shape themselves into orthodox pretzels, for example in the side falls, or in the back extensions on the floor. Much class time is spent adjusting the elbow to an exact distance from the ear. I believe that even for a complete mastery of this contraction-release system (that without doubt builds a strong, expressive torso), details like the elbow angle are beside the point. O.K. That's arguable. But in any case the child or layman should not be pulled towards a perfection of this or any other "system", if only because class time is always limited, and such an approach prevents the introduction of other valuable material.

What I am asking for is attention to expression in every step of a dance lesson. First of all, technique — whether ballet, Graham, or any other—should be taught not only to increase strength, flexibility or balance. It should also impart a sense of the whole person being involved in every movement. For example, a plié is an opening bend of the knees **along with** lift and life in the hips, chest, waist, arms, head and feet.

Further, every exercise should be built on complete movement phrases, no matter how short. A phrase has a rhythmic beginning, a high point and a close. The phrasing in a dance exercise should relate both to the structure of the movement, and to the phrasing of the musical accompaniment, if any. I know that good teachers of the R.A.D. or

any other method do this —usually. Once I watched a class in a Jerusalem studio, conducted by a teacher with a fine reputation. It was shortly before the R.A.D. exam, and she was drilling her students with the barking commands of a comic strip sergeant. The tension in her pupils' necks was plainly visible — almost as though they were waiting to be hit. You can be sure there was no room for any awareness of phrasing in their worried *développés*. Yet phrasing is absolutely basic to intelligible expression — whether of words or of movements.

Finally, every lesson should include fresh dance activities and experiences. By "dance" I do not mean a "do whatever you feel like" free-for-all. The content of a dance composition was stated above to be images of life in this world. These images, created by choreographic artists, are in turn made up of the raw material that is movement. The exact imagery is an indefinable, individual product. The teaching material, useful for choreographer, interpretive performer, or plain student is drawn from all the components of dance movement. These are: **motion** (a gesture or an action); **time**, which refers to speed and metrical pattern; **space**, which includes the body's shape, its design relationship to other bodies and direction; and **dynamic energy**, by which is meant the distribution of force and of tension through the movement phrase.

An infinite number of patterns can be built on short movement phrases, technically within the students' grasp—like a 3-step turn and a hold; like lunges and suspensions. Each of the movement components is varied to produce changing images and sensations of behaviour, mood and relationships. The teacher will plan a number of these, and the students are encouraged to contribute their own suggestions. All motions and all "techniques" lend themselves to this treatment, which involves the student in working with his art form, and not memorizing a set of calisthenics.

Specifically, the student will begin to see how movement phrases feel, and how they communicate. He will learn that a movement phrase can make a relaxed, silly comment; or a sad, quiet statement; or an angry, tense protest; or a proud, happy statement — depending as much on the rhythm, the spatial design and the dynamics of the movements as chosen, as upon the movements themselves.

There are, of course, other ways to impart dance experiences — through improvisations, through interpretations of music, through exploring dramatic themes. I believe that all of these tend to go off on too-specialized tangents, if they are unaccompanied by continual recharging at the source: constant play and interplay of movement materials. Further, I think it is important for the teacher to maintain a specific, fairly tight framework for each lesson. This leads to genuine creative exploration and prevents aimless “fooling around” which is as boring and unproductive for the student as for the observer.

At this point you are really entitled to a model lesson. Unfortunately the printed word is no medium for a stimulating dance class. The best I can do is to call your attention to some recent visitors — Merce Cunningham and Carolyn Carlson. Any one section of Cunningham's choreography in the '76 Israeli Festival could have been a phrase or an étude for class development, because his sole concern is with the energy of movement and the way it is affected by space and time.

If you were lucky, you saw Carolyn Carlson's demonstration lecture at the '77 Festival, in the Jerusalem Theater, where she showed the way she builds on the elements of space and time to create dance patterns. Carolyn Carlson

comes from the school of Alwin Nikolais, who in turn learned from Hanya Holm, who was the artistic heir of Mary Wigman. These artists, Doris Humphrey and others developed learning systems which give students a great wealth of dance experience. Judging by professionals that have been trained by these people, I'd say their methods are also successful for turning our fine, strong dancers. Not only did every single member of Carolyn Carlson's group last summer demonstrate outstanding physical control, each one also presented dance qualities as individual as a bassoon and a violin.

If you agree that there is room for enrichment in your teaching; if you believe that it is your responsibility as a member of this profession to prod all dance teachers here to give their pupils something beside physical education, poise, and numbered skills, then stir up the scene a bit. For a start, there are enough inventive teachers right here in Israel, so that you could organize intensive workshops, where you might meet once or twice a year to exchange ideas — perhaps take turns giving demonstration classes. As interest in dance education grows, you might occasionally invite an outstanding guest teacher like Carolyn Carlson to stimulate your thinking.

But please, just stop counting!

