

Aesthetic Development in Dance

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To speak of aesthetic development in dance implies that there is a condition of aesthetic maturity which can be identified as a continuum of growth in aesthetic understanding, and that aesthetic maturity in dance is distinct from aesthetic maturity in, say, the visual arts, or literature, or music. In this paper I will try to identify the "aesthetic behaviours" unique to dance, and to examine the notion that there is a growth of aesthetic understanding which can be monitored. The term dance can be used in three ways:

- As dancing: the act of purposively organising patterns of movement in time and space with the intent of giving form to the impulse which motivated the act. Dance-like activities which are spontaneous 'reflex' reactions to events in the physical and/or emotional environment can be said to be dancing only in a metaphorical sense, (e.g. dancing with rage, for joy, with excitement).
- As a dance: a specific instance of an act of dancing performed by an individual or individuals, either for themselves or for an audience, which has intrinsic significance and/or aesthetic value. Such an act may be improvised or previously choreographed.
- As The Dance: the generic term under which are subsumed such categories of dance as ritual dance,

theatre dance, social dance, therapeutic dancing, choreography, performance, etc. Each of these categories is part of the concept of dance, but none is paradigmatic of The Dance itself.

It is also important in any discussion that the participants identify the functions or purposes of the dance with which they are specifically concerned. Many functions have been attributed to the dance. They range from its social function, which is designed to enable people to engage in some form of communion with each other through dancing (e.g. folk dancing, ballroom dancing, disco dancing, etc.) to its therapeutic value, created by the opportunities inherent in dancing to expel emotional tension (cathartic) or to objectify emotions in symbolic form, thus rendering them susceptible to conscious analysis. Dance can be seen as an instrument of communication, its content, social, personal, political 'messages' articulated in the expressive form; it may be used as a method of perpetuating socio-cultural attitudes, behaviours or beliefs; as a means of influencing the behaviours or thinking of individuals and groups; or as a vehicle through which one might protest against a society or culture. It might have a pragmatic value, or it might be 'impractical', having little relation to the 'real' world; it might function as a means of altering consciousness, directly or indirectly; it might serve to initiate a process of self-extension in an individual, or to confirm their current self-image or self-concept. Any or all these functions may be present in the various categories of dance, although it is more likely that only a small number of needs can be satisfied in any one form.

As this paper has been written within a specific context, one in which a consideration of the arts is paramount, I intend to take Contemporary Dance in the West as my paradigm. I have chosen to concentrate on Contemporary Dance specifically because, due to its emphasis on individual expression, it is able to fulfil many of the needs (psychological, social and transcendentary) which I have identified above. It is also possible to identify several styles within Contemporary Dance which are distinguishable in terms of intention, physical characteristics and presentation.

However, we must also recognise that dance as an art form is not specifically concerned with fulfilling these functions, with the practice of skills in social interaction, with self-realisation, with cognitive, affective or emotional development. It is an aesthetic activity whose primary function is to encapsulate, embody and manifest a deeply felt impulse in a dancer and/or choreographer, thus giving that impulse expressive form. The emphasis on the aesthetic nature of the activity does not deny that the benefits described above can accrue through engagement in the activity for,

"A dancer cannot create and continue creating, and remain at a standstill from an individual growth point of view; the dancer cannot work with others in composing a dance and remain insensitive to good group relations ..."
(Sheets, 1979.)

neither can s/he move and develop dance skills without confirming and reaffirming their identity. But it is through the aesthetic nature of the activity that such developments take place. In the context of this discussion such benefits are implied even when not explicitly stated.

If we accept that aesthetic development may occur in one art form, but does not necessarily take place in another simply because of this, we imply that the mode of expression in each art form has distinct characteristics, that each has a unique 'language' which must be learned if the meanings inherent in the expressive forms are to be apprehended. In that each art form uses a different medium in order to fulfil essentially the same purpose it would seem reasonable to suppose that it is in this area that the 'language' is sited. In Contemporary Dance defined thus, the 'language' lies in the patterns of movement: the meanings and significances of the dance are communicated through this particular medium.

It is often maintained that the language of dance is universal. The rationale behind this belief seeming to be that, because the instrument of expression is the human body and every human being, regardless of

cultural or racial origin has such an instrument, then the language of dance must be a shared language in the most fundamental sense. 'Movement', it is said, 'speaks for itself'. This implies that translation and interpretation are not only unnecessary but also spurious. However, I would like to suggest that the language of dance is not universal, that various forms of dance even within the same culture and tradition (especially our own with its emphasis on individual expression) employ different languages which must be 'learned' if their significances are to be understood.

In dance the vehicle of communication is movement, and movement is inherently expressive. To accept this however, is not necessarily to accept that the expressive contents of the movements are understood by all who perceive them. The misapprehension that 'inherent expressiveness' in dance movements is synonymous with a one to one correspondence between movements and meaning is a common one and seems to be founded in a failure to recognise logical differences between 'functional expressive movement forms' and 'aesthetic expressive movement forms'. In the first category one might include spontaneous gestures, postural configurations and facial expressions, which betray our attitudes and reactions to phenomena and events in the lived environment. Such movement tends to be beyond the conscious control of the individual, and might contain stereotyped responses which were once authentic but which have now become habitual. It also includes those gestures which have acquired fixed meanings in a culture. (E.g. the handshake, nodding, pointing, etc.) Such gestures communicate specific meanings to those familiar with that 'language'.

'Aesthetic expressive movement forms' however, although designed to be vehicles of communication, are an entirely different kind of language form. They too are 'inherently expressive', but of subtle sensations, of inner feelings, of un-named and perhaps un-nameable impulses. They are deliberately formed, according to implicit and explicit structural principles, and are the result of reflective responses to encounters with the environment rather than instinctive reactions to it. It is in this sense that aesthetic forms are logically different from

functional forms. It is true that the latter might comprise the fundamental movement material from which the dance is formed, but this does not necessarily make them dance movements in themselves. The aesthetic form transforms the significance of its model, and endows it with new meanings and significances, and with new and deeper implications.

From the above one might conclude that whilst aesthetic forms might need their significance 'explained', functional forms can be universally understood. I feel that this conclusion would be erroneous, for the meanings and significances of functional forms also have to be learned by the perceiver, even though such learning takes place at a very early age and is implicit rather than explicit. Both functional and aesthetic categories are part of the language of movement, and, in that they are part of a language, share the fundamental characteristics of any language, i.e. deep and surface structures of meaning. The organising principles of these structures in the language of movement must be understood, either tacitly or consciously if the meanings inherent in the expressive forms (e.g. gestures, sequences, etc) are to be apprehended.

The deep structures of the language of dance lie in the psycho-biological structures of the human organism, more specifically in the complex interactions between the muscular, skeletal and nervous systems, cognitive structures and unique physical characteristics of the body itself. The early fundamental responses to the environment are manifested first in motor behaviour, which itself affects ensuing responses, resulting in modifications and refinements of the earlier movement patterns. Other influences on movement patterns, and consequently on perceptions of the world and the self, lie in the cultural and social milieu in which the movements occur. Such influences form the matrix which determines the implicit meanings and significances of movement patterns, the 'inherent expressiveness' of which we have spoken. Different cultural and social environments hold different attitudes to the world, to inter-relationships with other people, to man, which create different psychological orientations to experience. This implies that the meanings and

significances inherent in movement are not necessarily innate, but may be culturally determined. Any movement form which generates from a culture contains within it implicit significances which might not be available to persons from different cultures. Such significances are revealed in subtle qualitative and spatial patterns which form the deep structures of the language of movement, the inarticulable elements which are barely susceptible to analysis, and which form the premises upon which we base our interpretations of the meaning of movement.

The surface structures of the language of dance are easier to identify. They are the 'grosser' physical characteristics of the movement patterns, (for example, spatial characteristics, rhythmic structures, dynamic quality and phrasing, choreographic principles, 'motifs', gestures, etc.). The form these patterns take is obviously affected to some degree by their underlying deep structures, especially in the choice of elements which predominate in any one movement form or style. Both personal and socio-cultural elements conspire to guide a dancer or choreographer towards certain selections, made from the range of material available, and colour the surface of the language, or style, formulated.

Surface structures in the Dance can be learned, their meanings are relatively explicit. Deep structures however can only be learned by immersing oneself in the social or cultural milieu from which they were generated until the implicit meanings and significances which inform that culture's perception of the world become part of the fabric of the understanding of the individual himself.

If the meaning of the language of dance is to be apprehended, certain organising principles, which generate its underlying expressiveness, must be learned. These principles are obviously different from those contained in the 'languages' of other art forms (e.g. of shape, or sound, volume and substance). In dance the predominant perceptual mode is the kinaesthetic, although the subsidiary modes of aural and visual perception are also engaged. Development of sensitivity in kinaesthetic perception enables increasingly subtle meanings and significances to be

'intuited' in dances seen or performed. Such intuition, which could be called 'informed intuition', is the result of the integration of experience and understanding accumulated by an individual during his engagement in the Dance. An appropriate intuitive apprehension of the meaning of a dance is the result of an informed response to the dance.

We might at this point consider the notion of the aesthetic response to dance forms. Here, as with the other concepts I have examined, I shall forward a clear definition in order to avoid confusions which arise in discussions on the Dance. Aesthetic responses to dance are those which react directly to the aesthetic qualities of the movement patterns and whose underlying attitude to the kinetic form is not predominately functional. Non-aesthetic responses to the 'character' or mood of a piece, whilst neither inappropriate, in certain circumstances, nor invalid, are not 'pure' aesthetic responses, for they draw on material which is extraneous to the form itself. The insights and implications made available by such responses are limited in their range by the associative imagination itself, and the life experience of the individual, rather than by the expressive form.

The aesthetic response in dance comprises three distinct facets, all of which must be employed if the significance of the form is to be revealed to either dancer or spectator. Reimer (1970) identifies these facets (in relation to music) as the sensuous response, a necessary but by no means sufficient condition of aesthetic understanding, the perceptual response, and the imaginal response. The sensuous response, without which there could be no perception, might be crude and generalised, an amorphous sensate disturbance which might gratify some immediate personal requirement, or it might be finely differentiated and perceptive, tuned to detect the minute 'tremors' of feeling responses in which lie the deeper significances of the expressive form. The perceptual response is both the perception of the aesthetic qualities of dance (spatial and rhythmic structures, qualitative elements of movement, their speed, use of space, tensions or softness, release or containment of energy, etc) and the reaction to the expressiveness of those qualities or properties. One without the other cannot be

properly called aesthetic perception, for it is the integration of perception-of and reaction-to which endows it with its special character, and incidentally absolves it of charges of emotionality or intellectuality. The final facet of the aesthetic response in dance is the imaginal response. As the art object is only gradually revealed in the 'time-space' arts, the spectator, and dancer in this case, must to some extent follow the process of decision-making taken by the choreographer in the making of the dance. S/he must anticipate changes, inclusions, progressions, reversals, etc., in the development of the movement sequences, must 'choose' a line of development from the many probabilities revealed by the events just enacted, must continually 'imagine' new forms or progressions in the kinetic line, and be prepared for these lines not to be realised and for new possibilities to be presented. The imaginal response is the core of aesthetic perception in the temporal arts. For its successful employment it must build on the sensuous and perceptual responses which precede it.

Aesthetic maturity in dance then might be tentatively described as the ability to perceive the uniquely aesthetic qualities in a dance and to predict or imagine possible lines of development in the kinetic form from the clues made available by this perceptual sensitivity. We must also include in our criteria the ability to transcend the impressionistic (sensuous) and associative responses evoked by the surface qualities of the dance. Such an ability might be more difficult to acquire in dance than it is in the other arts for the instrument of its expression is the body and its medium, human movement. Both the sensations in the body and the kinetic forms themselves are likely to evoke memories and associations with life experience in an individual, and these may or may not have a great deal to do with the expressive form which generated them. I would suggest that aesthetic maturity in dance might be recognised by the ability to register these responses and then, with these as a matrix, to attend to the aesthetic qualities which reveal the 'sub-text', the delicate fluctuations of the feeling life of the expressive form rather than the emotional life of the choreographer.

The notion of aesthetic maturity in dance is however

further complicated by the fact that it displays itself in three distinct realms of aesthetic behaviour, namely those of the choreographer, of the dancer, and of the spectator. Each engages in the dance in a different capacity (although they may be one and the same person) and thus each set of behaviours must be considered separately if a clear understanding of aesthetic maturity in dance is to emerge.

The aesthetic behaviour of the choreographer, in that s/he is the creator of the expressive form, is relatively easy to identify, for it is displayed in the dances themselves. The choice of qualitative elements, the manipulation of temporal and spatial structures, the organisation of the kinetic material are all evidence of the aesthetic behaviour of the choreographer. The appropriateness of the movement forms to the 'theme', the variety of materials used within the limits imposed by the sensate impulse, the avoidance of cliché or habitual patterns of movement and/or interaction between dancers, all these aspects of the art enable a (mature) observer to evaluate the aesthetic maturity of the individual choreographer. An immature choreographer will not include in his work the range of possibilities inherent in mature works, and will display more of his wares and meanings on its surface, rather than imply that there are other significances available should one wish to find them. The presence of such implications can only be achieved if a choreographer is familiar with a full range of qualities and structural possibilities, and if s/he is sensitive to the smallest tremor of sensation engendered by the feeling impulse which motivated the work.

The aesthetic behaviour of the performer is different from that of the choreographer. (We will, for the purposes of this discussion, differentiate between the two whilst acknowledging that many choreographers perform their own works.) The function of the performer is not to create but to interpret the expressive form which is the 'given' in dance. One of the major pre-conditions of aesthetic maturity in the performer then must be a high level of physical skill in the particular style of moving demanded by the choreographic form. Without this no performer can interpret the expressive form with any degree of

success. (The physical skills of which I speak are not necessarily those one normally associates with 'dancer', for not all dance styles demand the high level of gymnastic skill which accompanies a dance training, although such skills might prove to be helpful.) In addition to this the aesthetically mature performer has the ability to perceive the relevance of the qualities and movement patterns they are asked to perform, and is aware of the significance of the qualities and elements which have been omitted from the dance, for meaning is contained as much in the absence of elements as in their presence. S/he is sensitive to implications inherent in the movement patterns as well as to the overt meanings; is aware of alternative lines of development in the kinetic form, for the performance must imply that the choice to follow a particular line was a choice; is committed to performance of the movement itself, to serving the demands of the choreographer. Personal expression must be subsumed to the requirements of the dance form, for if a performer once begins to display his or her 'self' in the dancing, the integrity of the movement is lost and with it the real significance of the dance. (Of course, if the dance form has been created to display the dancer's self then the problem does not arise.)

The spectator, like the performer, must be able to perceive the aesthetic qualities of the dance, to differentiate subtleties in quality and form, and to react to their expressiveness. S/he must be able to intuit the significance of the elements present in the expressive form and the significance of the omissions the choreographer has chosen to make. The aesthetically mature spectator will be aware of the existence of a vast range of elements and qualities and will be an 'active participant' in the event itself. The level of active participation (i.e. not just receiving but perceiving of the dance) to some extent determines the depth of the aesthetic experience engendered. The extent of the familiarity with the materials of the Dance determines the extent of the ability to transcend the associative/impressionistic response and attain the insights contained in the aesthetic response itself. The aesthetically mature spectator must, then, be experienced in the dance, and knowledgeable about the dance. Evidence of aesthetic

maturity in the spectator might be displayed in the needs s/he sees as being satisfied through engagement in the dance. The more 'meta-physical' those needs are, the more divorced from personal concerns and human problems, the more mature (aesthetically) the spectator could be said to be. Such maturity can only be achieved through engagement in the art of dance itself, either in the role of dancer or spectator.

Aesthetic maturity in dance is evidenced by the ability to perceive the inherent expressiveness of the formal properties of dance, and the ability to transcend the surface structures which might seduce the dancer or spectator with their sensuousness and which may mask the deeper significances inherent in the work. These formal properties might be organised in such a way as to encourage such seduction, by presenting narratives, or themes relating to human emotional life and relationships, or to interaction with the phenomenal world. They might, however, also be presented 'naked', designed not to tell a story, or to evoke emotional responses, but to realise a barely felt sensate disturbance which has no overt meaning, no 'human' association, no mood or character apart from its own expressiveness, but merely a manifestation of pure energy, the fundamental energy which motivates man to live, to breathe, to be-in-the-world. The aesthetically immature might perhaps be tempted to impose some meaning, or association with which s/he can identify, upon the form, the aesthetically mature will be able to receive the form, and will allow it to exert its inherent power on his or her own feeling impulses, in other words will accept it on its own terms.

Whilst it is tempting to plot a course of aesthetic development in dance and possible to draw parallels with stages of cognitive development, one must be wary of using such a model as a basis for a programme designed to facilitate the development of aesthetic sensitivity in the art form. It may be true that certain types of dance activity tend to succeed each other as a child develops in and through the dance. For instance, one of the first dance-like activities one observes in children is a spontaneous, exuberant movement response to encounters in the environment; this tends to be followed by a desire to stylise the movement patterns which express responses to events

in the physical and emotional environment, and to situate them in coherent expressive forms (assuming that a 'dance environment' is available to them). Much later increasing pleasure is obtained from engagement in dance activity in and for itself, rather than as a means of expressing oneself in a personal sense.

But development in aesthetic maturity is not characterised by the nature of the predominant thematic material used, or by the nature of the benefits seen to accrue from engagement in dance as an aesthetic activity (although one's attitude towards them undoubtedly changes as one develops aesthetically). It is characterised by the degree of refinement one achieves in one's aesthetic responses to the material of the dance, and in the nature of the insights one gains. If engagement in dance begins at an age when an individual has attained relatively high levels of maturity in other spheres of human development the notion of a chronological progression through the 'stages' may become redundant, for aesthetic maturity can be achieved through processes more suited to the levels of understanding, the modes of operation employed by the mature human being.

We might conclude, then, that there are identifiable behaviours which display aesthetic maturity in dance, and that such behaviours can be developed through engagement in dance as an aesthetic activity, either as dancer, as choreographer, or as spectator. Amongst these behaviours are the ability to reach beneath the overt elements of a dance in order to perceive the inherent expressiveness of the aesthetic qualities of the dance form; the ability to appreciate and understand the significances of works in the various styles of dance, including ballet, which form the fabric of the art form in our culture; and the ability to transcend one's immediate personal needs and concerns when interpreting the meaning of dance. Also, aesthetic development may take place on several fronts simultaneously (e.g. dancer, choreographer, spectator) although not necessarily at equal rates in each sphere. If aesthetic behaviours in dance can be identified it would seem probable that development of such behaviours could be facilitated through an educational programme. Such a programme would need to take

account of the highly complex nature of aesthetic development in dance, its potentially 'non-linear' developmental patterns, the unpredictable variables brought to bear on the developmental process by the nature of the artistic process itself, and the ultimate aim of individuals in their engagement in the art, that is whether they wish to develop predominately as a choreographer, as a performer or as a spectator.

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