

ON MAGIC

What can I say to you young people this evening, on this convocatory occasion, that will be of interest and help during the weeks to come? What besides giving you some sagacious and grandfatherly advice such as work hard; use your intelligence; get enough rest; don't stay up too late (that isn't good for dancers); cover up after a sweaty class so you won't catch cold; don't attempt to do jumps or other violent exertions until you have warmed up; don't sprain an ankle or a knee horsing around on the lawn; don't get burned to a crisp on your first Sunday at the beach; don't do this, don't do that, don't do this, don't do that; etc., etc...?

I can bid you a most cordial welcome to this twenty-first year of the Connecticut College School of the Dance and the American Dance Festival, and wish you a very successful six weeks and hope that this will be an exciting and revelatory milestone in your young lives. I can remind you that this might be a summer of decision for you, a crucial moment, when you discover that the fates who presided at your birth destined you to be a dancer, and that from now on this and nothing else or very little else, is your life.

Or, you may come to your senses, and decide that a life of perennially sore muscles, of yanking at your tendons and ligaments to stretch them always more and more is not for you. For muscles never stay stretched, you know. One good painful stretching on Monday will not do for Tuesday. Tuesday will demand its share of the discomfort, as well Wednesday and Thursday and the rest of the week. You may decide that a profession and an art that literally epitomizes the old bromide about "honest sweat," that is one long immersion in torrents of it, is not for you. Sweat, you know, is for most sensible human beings not quite nice. Not delicate, nor mannerly, and to be avoided whenever possible.

But a dancer lives -- I use this verb in all its implications and with all emphasis -- lives in it, around it, soaked with, permeated by, marinated in it. This may not be for you.

You may discover that no exertion at tennis, basketball, soccer, football, or other sports can compare to it in its demands on your stamina and muscular endurance.

All this and much else, may not be for you.

But for those who have been fated to dance, this may be a glad beginning, the first step up the rocky slope to Parnassus.

You will not be appalled by the prospect of a lifetime of rigors and austerities. Pain will not frighten you. You will only stretch more. You will glory in exertion. You will embrace discipline, for this is the key, temporal and spiritually, to mastery.

And you will share in an ancient mystery.

You will become initiate into a rite that makes potent magic.

Magic, you know is of many kinds. It is found in many places. Some people are born with it. Some have to search for it and slave for it. To others it is denied.

There are the chosen ones, the elect. Those who are elite by birth and the miracle of inheritance, or those who are made so by an act of supreme will. These are the magicians, the sorcerers, and there is always the possibility that you may be one of them.

There is a story that always amuses me. A man was once asked, "Mr. X, do you play the violin?" And Mr. X replied, "I don't know, I've never tried."

Perhaps you are in the position of this gentleman. You may have capacities unsuspected

by yourself and by the entire waiting world. For the world does wait. It is ready and avid to welcome those creatures of light, those winged beings who transport our imaginations to regions where Pegasus himself soars, those whose power it is to transform our mundane existence to a world of enchantment for one ephemeral yet eternal instant.

For you, little you, the center of your own universe, the inheritor of untold generations of human attributes and sensibilities, have it in you to be not just a dancer, not even a great dancer, but perhaps the most fabulous dancer in human history.

Preposterous, you will say. You will squirm inside with incredulity and perhaps a shock of delight.

But this is not as impossible nor as improbable as it sounds on first hearing. Let us examine the idea. It is intriguing and provocative.

You have a human body. Pavlova, Nijinsky, Duncan, Humphrey, had a human body. Graham has a human body.

You have one head, two arms, two legs, hands, feet, internal organs, just like theirs.

You have, therefore, the first indispensable requisite.

You may have the proportion and musculature that would enable your body, with training and experience, to perform the physical and metaphysical miracles that these magicians I mentioned were able to perform.

You may have, inside that one head, the rare thing called talent, and its indispensable companion intelligence. Inside what is poetically and metaphorically and physically referred to as the heart, you may have the will, the vision and the magnanimity that they had.

You might, you may, have it. Like Mr. X, of my little story, you don't know if you've never tried.

These great magicians found themselves, at a certain moment in a class room with many students for the first time. They were not capable of miracles just then. Perhaps they showed a special aptitude. Perhaps not. It is possible that they were inept and awkward for a number of months or even years. It is even possible that their teachers entertained grave doubts as to their ability, and were tempted to tell them to go home, forget about trying to be a dancer and do something else with their lives.

That is possible. I have seen it happen.

A beginning has to be made sometime, someplace. Universes, stars and planets are said to have had a beginning. This could very well be yours.

I am always hoping. When I face a group of young people for the first time I remind myself that here before me untrained, inexperienced, all arms and legs going everywhere and nowhere, may be the great dancer of the future. Here may be that sorcerer who will practice and master the ancient magic, in whose hands it will be reborn. He will give it a grace and radiance never seen before.

What does this magic consist of? That is difficult to explain with words. In fact, it is quite beyond their power, since they cannot encompass the ineffable, that which cannot be heard or felt or tasted or smelled. It must be seen, not only with our mechanical organ of sight, but with a far sharper, deeper perceptivity, that of the spirit and the instinct.

But I can describe some of the effects of this magic. You will remember in your myths and fairy tales of infancy that the chief function of magic is to transform, to transport, to negate

mundane laws of matter, to make the impossible real.

A great dancer will move his or her body in such a way that your attentions and awareness will be arrested and held captive, literally hypnotized. This ritual, this incantatory spell will be made up of quite familiar movements. You yourself have performed them in their elementary form, in your daily life. There will be walks, runs, jumps, turns, falls, with these simple muscular manipulations transmuted to the region of art, he will make you feel things within you for which there are no words.

When he walks on to a stage a shock of a recognition will come over you. You will recognize yourself magnified, graced with incandescence and beauty. You will become transformed. You will be transported to regions known and remembered from the remotest past, remembered with your instincts and your atavism, yet new, perceived for the first time.

The limitations of gravity and fatigue and human debility do not exist for him, and through him, for you. The impossible will be palpable, present, immediate. You will walk as gods and goddesses walk, run with the wind, leap free of the leaden tyranny of gravity, turn as whirlwinds and maelstroms, fall with despair and ecstasies.

This is the magic of the dancer.

Find out whether you are graced with it. Discover whether, hidden deep within you, potent, ready to be born, is the power of the sorcerer.

There are tribes and nations remaining in the world for whom the dance is still a liturgical practice for making real the unreal. We are fond of looking on these people as primitives, backward and undeveloped. This is true when we think in terms of materialistic attainments, television sets, automobiles and atomic bombs. But there are ways in which these people prove themselves very advanced, and possessed of wisdom and capacities far beyond our pragmatic ones.

Quite recently I had an astonishing experience having to do with the dance in the form of ritual, religion and magic, as contrasted to our modern scientific culture.

A committee of individuals from various endeavors, music, drama, graphic arts, literature and dance assembled by Mrs. Stewart Udall, wife of the secretary of the interior, was visiting the various centers of American Indian culture in Arizona and New Mexico. Our task was to advise on the location of a projected school for the preservation and perpetuation of the arts, dance, ceremonial, music, percussion, and costume of the various Indian Nations in this country.

You may well imagine that this was a fascinating experience. We saw some extraordinary performances both in the traditional styles, and in their adaptation to serve contemporary choreographic and dramatic creativity. We encountered some arresting talent.

On our last day, having finished our itinerary and our duties, we were taken to visit, as a rare treat, the tribal ceremonial at the ancient pueblo of San Felipe, which lies between Santa Fe and Albuquerque, and antedates these two pale-face pueblos by I don't know how many centuries. It is an ancient human habitation, whose style and architecture and way of life have remained unperturbed by the intrusion of Spaniard, Mexican and Angle.

The central square, was lined with spectators. Their automobiles covered every available space outside the town. In the plaza, a blazing hot dusty arena, magic was in being. Hundreds of participants, men, women, and children, costumed superbly as one should be when addressing the gods, were dancing to the chant and drum beat of a chorus of elders standing in the center of

the huge formation. The solemn multitude moved with a curious and mesmeric unanimity. There appeared to be a prolonged and re-iterative monotony to the ritual, whose basic pattern was an alternating stamping of the feet, with an occasional suspension of the rhythmic pulse, one foot held off the ground, a turn, a side to side emphasis of the beat with the arms, the men holding in each hand a gourd rattle, the women two branches of pine or spruce.

We, being interested in the mechanics and construction of the dance began to analyze the rhythmic structure of the simple movements. We were baffled. Our musician, young Maurice Peress, Director of the Symphony Orchestra at Corpus Christi and I laughingly refused to accept defeat. This was a challenge. We would get to the bottom of it. We counted, analyzed, kept track of the musical bars and suspensions of rhythm and of the basic dance patterns and their interruptions. We tried again and again, for hours, while the dancers, baked in the sweat of exertion and fervor, danced under the merciless sun, moving as one inscrutable, God-like, in perfect consonance with a pulse, a phrasing an architecture of infinite complexity and subtlety, known only to them. We failed completely to reduce this invocation to our pragmatic terms and formulas.

The countryside was cruelly parched. The sun was molten, angry fire in the horizon as we drove, awed and exhausted, in our air conditioned cars, to Albuquerque, there to spend the night and next day and then take our departures back to New York.

Martha Hill, Director of the Dance Department of Juilliard, where I also work, stayed behind for a few days visiting friends in Santa Fe.

On her return she had a curious story to tell me. The ritual at San Felipe had been a rain dance. There had been not a cloud in the sky for weeks, months. The next day there was not rain, but a deluge. The streets of Santa Fe were flooded with water above the knees.

The dance is a potent magic.

You may never learn to influence the forces of nature with your dance. Very well. But it is quite possible that, in becoming a fine, or even great dancer, you may, with other artists, sages and philosophers and men of good will the world over, influence the nature of man, and create a better climate for him on this earth.

Magic, as you know, is very largely composed of the human will. You will, mightily, for something to happen, and you take steps and measures. I strongly suspect that our beautiful friends in the square of San Felipe know this and have known it from time immemorial. What Gods worthy of the name can for long remain deaf or insensitive to the power and beauty and the aggregate will of an entire tribe, expressed in a formidable dance?

We also can invoke our gods, our demons, angels and furies wherever they may be. We can challenge them and defy them, and propitiate and tire and deafen them with the clamor of our songs and our dances. Perhaps they will hear us, and send us their grace and benediction, a rain to redeem us from a drought which threatens us, one infinitely more lethal than that of the arid western plains.