

## Classicism and Dance

### OPENING QUESTION:

How does Ballet embody ideas?

Conversation prompts: TBD

### Images:

1. Apollo by Balanchine contemporary performance photo by Steve Caras. Martins and Farrell
2. 1821 set design Allesandro Sanquirico ' La Morte di Ettore', temple of Minerva
3. ( Nureyev ) sleeping beauty?
4. Isadora Duncan by Genthe 1920
5. Baroque equestrian formations, 1667
6. Forsythe, Impressing the Czar ( In the Middle Somewhat Elevated, Royal Ballet of Flanders )
7. Julie Kent in Swan Lake
8. Classical Indian dancer Sai Santhosh Radakrishnan
9. Japanese Noh actor Mikata Shizuka
10. Statue Shiva Nataraj
11. Carlos Dyer drawing for Muriel Stuart Arabesque in Golden Ratio.
12. Maria Taglioni litho from Italy, 'La Silfide' by Fillipo Taglioni

For conversation 2

Arthur Haskell. 'The Meaning of Classical Dance' essay  
Oxford Journal of Aesthetics, 1962 2(1) pp55-58

The two forms of dancing which have moved me the most are the classical ballet and the classical dance of India. The word 'classical' is important. It implies a set of rules that are rigid, that have developed over a long period, in the sense that languages have developed, and consequently a complex technique that must be mastered. Or the word means a lifelong subjection to a master or guru, such as is unknown to any other art. These forms of dance would therefore at first sight appear to be extremely artificial and highly stylized, allowing little freedom to the individual. In fact this is not the case. The craft is essential if we are to think of the dancer as an artist. When we go back into prehistory for the origins of the dance we find that it was at the service of magic and as such could not be a haphazard affair. Primitive man, for instance in New Guinea today, rehearses his dances for a far longer period than in

any European Opera House. He must store up the power that is necessary to move his audience, to make them able to bear the pain of certain tribal rights, to excite them to war or to inspire them in the hunt. Classical ballet is the furthest removed of all dance forms from the primitive, or so it would seem, yet the same principles apply. The daily repetition of exercises, the surrender to a teacher, the mastery of the body—always monotonous and sometimes painful—not only serve to conquer technique; they prepare the mind. There is the same storing of power as with primitive man. The repetition of exercises, this mastery of the body, is something that the mystic and the dancer have in common. There comes a time when the body is mastered and the dancer is free to express himself and to move his public.

These exercises are necessary to all dancers; yet very few gain that freedom and can be considered artists. The essential quality must be there. Craftsmanship can be learned; artistry comes as a grace. It is the power of intense concentration, of humility, of the abandonment of the self to find the self through complete identification with what is being interpreted. And again we find ourselves talking in terms of mysticism where the primitive and the sophisticated meet in the dance.

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Downloaded from <http://bj.aesthetics.oxfordjournals.org/> at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign on February 4, 2013

## 2. LK, Program Notes p113 Introduction to 1952 Souvenir Booklet

In a great ballet company, upon what does greatness depend? Upon repertory, audience, personnel and tradition. Our New York City Ballet is called the greatest company in the West. It is not by chance that this recognition has arrived quite quickly. Twenty years of preparations lie behind this immediate position and prestige; almost two centuries of uninterrupted tradition in training and performance maintain its special style and staging.

George Balanchine, still a young man, had been final choreographer for Serge Diaghilev, who commencing with Fokine and Nijinsky of the great imperial companies, soon invested his exiled dancers with international advance-guard music and painting, lavishing them on the wide world as a seminal force. Russian-schooled in state academies of music and dance, Balanchine came of age creatively in Paris, where, more than two centuries before, classic ballet as we know it was born in the court-opera of Louis XIV. Transplanting his already recognized genius in New York City in 1933, he founded, with Lincoln Kirstein, the School of the American Ballet.

This school, now the largest and most secure in the world ( outside European state-subsidized institutions ) is staffed by masters of theatrical dancing, each one famous on the world's stage, each a preceptor of the virtuoso methods of Franco-Russian taste and style. Here have been instructed the distinguished soloists and incomparable corps de ballet, which, within the last five years, have established our new criterion, as has been attested by the honors accorded them in recent tours of England and the continent.

The style of the New York dancers, as analyzed by Balanchine, capitalizes on the lithe, long-lined athleticism and innate rhythmic gift, as well as a certain gracious angular abruptness inbred here. In forty years he has framed and adorned this new-found native intelligence.

3. Joan Lawson, 'The Principles of Classical Dance', 1979, Borzoi Books. p 8

O.E.D. Classicism: following or follower of classical style

Classical: standard of using Ancient Greek authors and artists

Style: the manner of writing, speaking or doing as opposed to the matter expressed or done.

Classicism in the arts of painting and sculpture signifies an ideal human body. Each work must show a strict sense of balance and formal design, which is serene and generalised rather than individual. In ancient art, the human body is portrayed in its most harmonious form, no matter from what angle it is viewed. Thus the lines and angles of the head, body, arms and legs must be suitably related and to the central line of balance in order to display a perfectly balanced pose.

Classical style in dance is the vocabulary of movement that conforms to rules established by long practice. The steps and poses from simple folk dances were refined by courtiers and later by dancing-masters who concentrated on how to behave and display oneself to the best advantage in aristocratic society. When professional dancers employed this technique more attention was paid to the look and correct detail of each movement as part of the display. And these movements must show each dancer's body as a perfect balanced whole.

The choreographer is like a writer, but instead of selecting words appropriate to the meaning and structure of a sentence, he selects steps and poses from the dance vocabulary, phrasing them so they are appropriate to each other, to the line of dance and to the music. The performers 'who speak his words' must interpret them in the proper style in order to communicate that line of dance to the audience.

4. Paul Valery, 1923, Philosophy of the Dance from 'Dance and the Soul' in *Dialogues*, trs Wm McCausland Stewart, NY, Pantheon Books, 1956, p25-62

Let me begin at once by telling you without preamble that to my mind the dance is not merely an exercise, an entertainment, an ornamental art, or sometimes a social activity; it is a serious matter and in certain of its aspects most venerable. Every epoch that has understood the human body and experienced at least some sense of its mystery, its resources, its limits, its combinations of energy and sensibility, has cultivated and revered dance.

It is a fundamental art, suggested if not demonstrated by its universality, its immemorial antiquity, the solemn uses to which it has been put, the ideas and reflections it has engendered at all times. For the dance is an art derived from life itself, since it is nothing more or less than the action of the whole human body; but an action transposed into a world, into a kind of *space-time*, which is no longer quite the same as that of everyday life.

...

Quite a bit of philosophy, you may think...and I admit that I've given you rather too much of it. But when one is not a dancer; when one would be at a loss not only how to perform, but how to explain, the slightest step; when, to deal with the miracles wrought by the legs, one has only the resources of a head, there's no help but from a certain amount of philosophy. In other words, one approaches the subject from far off, in the hopes that distance will dispel the difficulties. It is much simpler to construct a universe than to explain how a man stands on his feet - as Aristotle, Descartes, Leibnitz and quite a few others will tell you.

#### Image captions

Isadora Duncan used her imagination and artistry to intuit first principles for dance. She found them in Ancient Greek ideals.

Rudolph Nureyev had perfect fifth position. He was the epitome of a classical ballet dancer. During his lifetime, like Isadora Duncan, he was one of the most famous and admired people in the world.

Julie Kent is an American classical ballerina. A pure classicist, Miss Kent is known for the emotional depth of her dramatic portrayals of Classical Ballet's greatest roles such as Juliet, Odette/Odile, and Giselle. This is a photo of Swan Lake.

Peter Martins and Suzanne Farrell together were one of the legendary pairings in the history of classical ballet. Confident and bold, beautiful and intelligent, some contend that their performances of Balanchine's 'Apollo' are the finest. This photo is from Balanchine's 'Apollo'.

Adapting classicism to the purposes of Romanticism, Maria Taglioni, an Italian ballerina in Paris, helped change the course of Western art with her enormous popularity and captivating ethereal performances. Perhaps the first to dance on pointe, she made people think dancers could fly, and affect the soul.

Drawing by Carlus Dyer, Arabesque in a geometric Golden Section, a basis for classical order.

“As  $a$  is to  $b$ , so  $(a + b)$  is to  $a$ ”

William Forsythe revolutionized classical ballet by taking balance off-balance. He continues an expansive exploration of ballet and dancetheater. This is 'In the Middle, Somewhat Elevated' from the Ballet, "Impressing the Czar" performed by the Royal Ballet of Flanders.

Sai Santhosh Radakrishnan is a classical Indian dancer. Every aspect of his technique is based on ancient classical principles. Dance is a cultivation of mind, body and spirit, and a gift to observers.

Classical Ballet owes a debt to horse ballets and other military exercises and displays, which were the formation and parade and spectacle culture of their time. Military parade merged with masquerades; fighting scenes were elaborate in early opera-ballets. The large formation structure of classical ballet derived from military culture.

The Lord Shiva is dancing the cosmic dance of creation and destruction. He is the highest expression of Reality. Aum.

Classicism everywhere. In this lithograph from 1821, dancers dressed in Roman garb play out their tragedy beneath the wildly outsized classical architecture serving as the Temple of Minerva. This is a kind of literal classicism.

A Japanese Noh actor dances in front of an enormous painting by Raphael during a rare performance in London. Noh theater is considered the loftiest expression of Japanese aesthetic qualities, imbued with ancient dance, classical poetry, and Zen Buddhism.