

# CRITICAL DISCOURSE IN THE CHOREOGRAPHY CLASS

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In a typical choreography class the teacher leads improvisations and makes assignments, and students produce small dances, or “studies”. These are presented to the class, presumably so that novice choreographers may improve their creative efforts through receiving the observations and comments of their teachers and peers, and so that the students’ capacity to observe, analyse, interpret and judge may be developed. There are thus two distinct but interdependent practices in which students might be expected to gain proficiency during the course. The first is **producing studies**: exploring and making creative choices about movement and structure in the dance. The second practice is that of **criticism**: analysing, justifying and articulating interpretations and judgements of the work just seen. Penelope Hanstein, in “On the Nature of Artmaking in Dance”, specifies 15 distinct skills necessary to the practice of criticism. Among these are “discerning patterns and formal properties” and “perceiving the part/whole relationships within the work” (p.161). Clearly, formulating high quality criticism requires good observational skills - open-minded, pre-reflective looking at dances and dancing. Mastering these skills would contribute greatly to the efforts of student choreographers to produce successful works.

The literature on the teaching of choreography concerns itself almost exclusively with the practice of creating studies. Scores of pedagogical source materials offer improvisations, movement explorations, design exercises, creative problems and lists of the qualities considered essential to good dances. Most such manuals on dance craft are thorough and well organised, and may even be written so that teachers can actually lead class sessions by reading aloud from the text (Blom and Chaplin’s **The Intimate Act of Choreography** is one example). Although these texts contain nearly everything one always wanted to know about the craft of choreography, they are not nearly so rich a resource where the practice and teaching of criticism is concerned. Yet this is the literature consulted by choreography teachers seeking insight into all aspects of the teaching of dance classes. In this paper I will explore attitudes and assumptions toward the practice of criticism that are both explicit and implicit in the standard literature on teaching choreography, and will identify some of the pedagogical implications of these attitudes and assumptions.

Important and complex questions confront teachers of choreography: What are the objectives of criticism? Do these differ at various levels of training? How should students be taught critical skills with respect to the dance? An early attempt

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to grapple with at least the first of these questions was made by Gertrude Lippincott in her article "The Function of the Teacher in modern Dance Composition". Lippincott asserted that the teacher must "set the standards of worth and excellence which will prevail. His ideas will influence every aspect of the students' dances" (496). Later, she tells us that the teacher "should be an able critic of the dance craft" (p.497). Yet she does not spell out precisely what constitutes "being an able critic", or what the sources and justifications of a teacher's standards of worth should be. Indeed, in speaking of the teacher's principal task - which is to inspire students to create good dances - Lippincott says that "how he accomplishes this end, short of beating his students over the head, would seem to me to be his own business" (p.497). She does not address the potential value in the choreography course of peer and selfcriticism.

The notion of the teacher as the sole arbiter of taste and judgement is found also in Louis Horst's *Modern Dance Forms*. The text features actual remarks made by Horst in response to student dances presented in a workshop, but there is no mention of critical commentary by students or of the possible educational value of critical discussion among participants in a class.

A different view of the teacher's role as critic is found in Elizabeth R. Hayes' *Dance Composition and Production*. Published in 1955, this work remains very well known in the field. Hayes advocates "constructive rather than negative criticism" to help "the beginner who frequently lacks faith in himself" (p.7). Warning against "dictatorialism" and "vapid flattery" on the part of the teacher, she says that finally, in the role of dance critic, he must be able to analyse and interpret to the students their successes and their shortcomings and to show them how to evaluate wisely their own creative products. (p.9)

Hayes goes no further on the subject of guiding students' efforts to analyse and interpret dances. Like many others, she does list qualities of a "good" dance - unity, variety, contrast, repetition, etc. - but offers no further insight into **how** the presence or absence of any of these elements might figure in the interpretation or evaluation of a particular dance. Hayes' insistence on "constructive" criticism raises the issue of the psychological and social environment necessary or preferred for creativity in the dance class. Many authors share this concern, and in an effort to advocate "a permissive atmosphere" in the dance studio, some reveal what appears to be fear of the practice of criticism. In *Dance: A Projection for the Future*, a distinguished group, including John Martin, Jose Limón and Alwin Nikolais, discussed the importance of "an atmosphere free from those negative attitudes or taboos which lead to interruption, distortion or destruction of that artistic tendency which is innate in every individual" (p.92). It is interesting, perhaps even revealing, to note that their list of "Recommended Areas of Concentration for Choreographers" does not mention critical skills, although this entry does appear on their list for students of dance history (p.110). The idea of a "permissive" environment, and an atmosphere of trust in which students feel free to experiment in their creative endeavors, is not in dispute here. Yet it must be pointed out that in their zeal to provide such an atmosphere, teachers may tend to regard the practice of criticism as psychologically threatening to students. This apprehension seems to motivate Alma Hawkins' remarks in *Creating Through Dance*:



"The task of facilitating the release and development of creativity is somewhat similar to the problem of getting a small frightened animal to come out of a deep hole. You cannot demand or get behind it and push. Instead, you must tempt, attract, and reassure". (p.15)

Hawkins goes on to say that teachers must strive to create "psychological safety" for students by providing an emphasis on "acceptance and understanding ... with a minimum of external evaluation" (p.15). It is easy to see how concerns such as this may lead to the tendency to place stringent limitations upon the practice of criticism in the choreography class. These same concerns are addressed in Margery Turner's *New Dance: Approaches to Non-Literal Choreography*. Discussing teachers who find it problematic to evaluate students' work while attempting to foster creativity in "a permissive environment", Turner says "Afraid of imposing their own ideas on their students, these teachers choose to remain too much in the background, refraining from making even routine criticisms or suggestions" (p.68). Turner's solution is to make evaluation "subtle and almost imperceptible", by asking the student at various stages in the creative process to assess **his own** strengths and weaknesses (p.68). However, several deficiencies of this approach spring immediately to mind. First, by advocating subtle and imperceptible evaluation, Turner promotes the idea that hearing direct art concrete evaluation may stifle students' creativity. Secondly, she fails to consider that students may not be equipped to recognise or to articulate the artistic strengths and weaknesses of their own work. Finally, Turner offers little guidance on how her evaluation approach would teach students objectively to reflect upon their work in terms both of its strengths and its weaknesses. Her approach is unlikely to train students to become able and confident observers and critics.

Turner also offers a list of questions to stimulate discussion (p.69). Yet asking the same set of questions about each student's dance study runs the risk of restricting observation and criticism to the parameters of the aesthetic values implicit in the set of questions, but perhaps irrelevant to the dance under consideration. Pre-determined values ought not become litmus tests of artistic quality. Turner also dilutes the merit of even the "subtle and almost imperceptible" approach as a means of teaching critical skills when she states "the teacher should bear in mind that it is not necessary to draw specific conclusions ... there can be no firm conclusions growing out of such class discussions" (p.70). What this fails to take into account is that providing genuine criticism involves not only learning to draw conclusions, but learning to substantiate them with direct reference to the dance being evaluated..

Still another attitude which might discourage teachers from advocating and teaching critical skills is found in what is probably the most influential text on the subject of teaching choreography, Doris Humphrey's *The Art of Making Dances*. Widely used in choreography classes, the book is cited in nearly every subsequent work on this subject. Throughout, Humphrey is concerned that dance not become overintellectualized: "Intellectual concepts are for the world of fact, for mental exercises such as philosophy and science, and for the word arts capable of mailing evaluations, which are, for the most part, foreign to the dance". (p.165)

Humphrey adds that the dancer is "notoriously unintellectual" and "finds analysis painful and boring" (p.17); she also asserts that the dancer is "a notoriously



nonverbal thinker, and inarticulate as well" (p.21). On criticism, she says only "Listen to qualified advice; don't be arrogant ... it would not hurt these young people to listen a little longer and to exercise some humility" (p.164).

One might be tempted to conclude from all this that critical analysis - substantiating interpretations and justifying aesthetic judgements - is an intellectual pursuit whose proper domain lies somewhere outside the choreography class. To be sure, such activities, and the disciplined observation on which they must be grounded, are philosophical and require intellectual effort. But Humphrey is incorrect in stating that this makes them of little use to novice choreographers, or beyond their capabilities. Her view fails to consider the degree and kind of influence that substantive analysis and criticism might exert on creativity. It overlooks as well that in a class of, say, ten students, each must - or should - act as an observer/critic nine times for every one time he presents his own work. Thus the need for students to acquire the skills of critical discourse ought to be taken as seriously in the choreography class as is the need to teach students to put together steps, phrases and dances. This is particularly important in view of George Beiswanger's crucial point that the choreographer is the first person to critically evaluate his own work. Beiswanger, in "Rakes Progress, or Dances and the Critic," and "Doing and Viewing Dances: A Perspective for the Practice of Criticism", argues that verbal and critical skills are part and parcel of the very act of creating a dance. "Creating, valuing and interpreting are functionally distinguishable yet organically united activities within the complex transaction by which dances are made", he writes (p.30). He also describes the choreographer as being in the critic's seat, in the position of being his work's first viewer and judge ... because there is no way for him to engage in making dances, on however spontaneous a plane, without taking note of what he is doing and appraising what is getting done. (Beiswanger p.9)

Reflection and appraisal are not skills that students automatically possess, or that they will acquire unassisted. Students' critical abilities, like those of most people, are colored by prejudices and quasi-theoretical blinders of all kinds. For the choreography student, these must be overcome through training in the skills of looking, seeing and judging dances provided in tandem with training in the craft of making those dances.

There are two basic questions central to all theories of art criticism, which should be taken into account in the effort to teach skills of looking, seeing and judging. To do so will help to make clear how various critical approaches can affect the nature of observation and evaluation. The first of these questions concerns artists' presumed "intentions", and asks "Is the artist's intention a valid basis for judging the success or failure of art?" The second question is "How relevant to judgement are the feeling responses of the beholder?" Appeals to artists' intentions are key to expression theories in art. In the dance literature, the most eloquent argument for expression theory is offered by John Martin. In *The Dance in Theory*, Martin insists that it is the dancer's purpose "to arouse us to feel a certain emotion about a particular object or situation", and that "the dancer's movements must inevitably have emotional connotations" (p.22). Lois Ellfeldt further emphasises this point in *A Primer for Choreographers*, where she states



"It is always a question if the meaning intended by the choreographer is the same as that perceived by the audience. Obviously, a dance is more successful when audience reaction bears a close resemblance to the choreographer's intent." (p.86)

The problem inherent in viewing a dance with any of these pre-disposing concerns in mind - concerns for the creator's intentions, or for the emotional or psychological effects of the dance - is that these approaches influence true observation and evaluation of the dance itself. For novice critics and choreographers to be made aware of this would enhance their own developing critical skills. Indeed, Milton H. Snoeyenbos and Carole A. Knapp examine and reject expression theory in the dance in general, and Martin's theory in particular, in "Dance Theory and Dance Education". They note that "dance is the last stronghold of the expression theory", because dances are composed of humans, and expression terms - such as sad, angry, joyful - are "paradigmatically applied to humans" (p.17). Snoeyenbos and Knapp argue not only that expression theory is "false," but that it "fails to provide an adequate rationale for criticism and dance education" (p.17). Citing several choreographic approaches completely divorced from intentions or emotional expression, they point out that

"In dances that falsify the expression theory, the focus is on movement itself, and not on movement as a medium for the conveyance of emotions, attitudes or opinions ... it is movement we should consider in an attempt to provide a more objective dance aesthetics". (p.20)

In modern aesthetics, appeals to the "artist's intention" are widely dismissed as "the intentional fallacy"<sup>1</sup>. The reasoning is that it is not only unlikely that it can be determined - even by the artist - whether he has succeeded or failed at realising his intentions, but it is also irrelevant to questions of meaning and worth: the work as it stands is all that the artist has given us to evaluate. But even if teachers, resisting the lure of expression theory, succeed in directing students' critical focus away from artists' presumed intentions and toward the dance itself and its movement, we are still left with the problem of mistaking feeling-based responses for actual evaluative criticism. If the issue is no longer what the artist 'meant' or 'said', is intelligent criticism of a piece reduced merely to a report of whether or not one liked the work? In the "Evaluations" section of *Dance Composition: A Practical Guide for Teachers*, Jacqueline M. Smith lists over 50 questions one might ask about a dance - about movement, emotion, actions, efforts, space, staging, etc. However, she then states that the fundamental criterion in judging art is pleasure, and that feelings of pleasure are "inextricably bound with intellectual reflection on any level". She adds that the "most important question" to ask about a work of art is whether or not the work was pleasing. Did you like it? If the answer is yes, there is, perhaps, to need for further evaluation, except that it can become a useful learning process to understand why it was appreciated. If the answer is no, then probably reasons for its failure can be found by asking some of the questions. (p.92-98)

Modern aesthetic theory has described efforts to ground criticism in feeling responses as "the affective fallacy"<sup>2</sup>. This argument holds that the work of art itself cannot actually be **judged** on the basis of such questions as "Do I like it?" or "How

<sup>1</sup> Wimsatt, William K., and Monroe C. Beardsley. "The Intentional Fallacy." *Sewanee Review*. 55 (1946), 468-88.

<sup>2</sup> Wimsatt, William K., and Monroe C. Beardsley. "The Affective Fallacy." *Sewanee Review* 57 (1949), 458-88.



does it make me feel?" because the answers to such questions depend only on psychological eccentricities such as memories, feelings, fantasies and sentiments the work might trigger in the viewer. Advocates of transactional, or response, criticism, on the other hand, argue that a work cannot be understood or evaluated apart from its "results". The effects of a work of art, psychological and otherwise, are held to be essential to criticism of it <sup>3</sup>.

The "Did you like it?" approach to criticism has been the subject of considerable disagreement in the dance literature. David Best, in "Some Problems in the Aesthetics of Dance," points out several difficulties presented by this approach, noting it is difficult to see how, on a subjectivist view, the arts could lay claim to any function beyond that of relaxation or catharsis ... without standards it is difficult to see how an activity could be regarded as educational. (p.106)

Best points out that there must be "an internal, logical relationship between the dance and our emotional response", and that "to explain one's aesthetic response is to give reasons, not causes" (p.109). He concludes by stating "When we see that we can give reasons for our emotions, the dilemma resolves, since we can do both, accept the crucial importance of personal responses to dance and insist on standards". (p.111)

The notion that the practice of criticism involves pursuing the experience of art "beyond the first response" is advanced, as well, by Alma Hawkins in her *Creating Through Dance* (p.101). To Hawkins, the work should first of all be viewed and judged as a totality, and

"Criticism should be made in terms of the specific dance observed. The evaluator should not be concerned with judging one work in relation to another. He should be concerned with the qualitative aspects of the single dance. Each work must be analysed in terms of its own intrinsic nature." (p.103)

The clearest and most comprehensive analysis of the concepts and skills involved in interpreting and judging dances is found in *Dance Analysis*, edited by Janet Adshead. One of the contributors to this volume, Pauline Hodgins, states that the evaluation of any dance which rests upon experiential values "can only be valid or worth consideration if the experience cited relates directly to the dance ... This means that the reasons for the experience, opinion and judgement are found in the features, forms, characters, qualities, meanings or significance of the dance itself". (p.94)

Although these writers and others appear to favour going beyond "Did you like it?" in evaluating a dance, the literature has not yet made clear just how this is to be done.

Teachers in the arts know that it is easy to philosophise about and envision pedagogical results, but difficult to formulate effective teaching methods, and this certainly seems to be the case with criticism in the choreography class. Many dance educators speak of the symbolic language of dance, yet shy away from the ordinary language of critical evaluation. But criticism is not an intellectual, linguistic or philosophical threat to creativity. It is, rather, integral to creating and understanding art. Teachers can develop their students' skills in the practice of criticism by teaching them to listen to, and to choose carefully, the words and statements of

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<sup>3</sup> Tompkins, Jane P., *Reader Response Criticism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980.



ordinary discourse about dance and the other arts. Through disciplined observation and careful use of ordinary language, students can learn to provide good reasons for the aesthetic judgements they make about their own creative work and that of others. The following illustrates how ordinary language conditions both observations and criticism:

Imagine a choreography class. A student has shown a study and is awaiting comments. The teacher asks the group either "What did you see in the dance?" or (using Smith's question) "Did you like the dance?" The two questions set quite different terms for the discussion. The first calls for language describing the dance itself and implies the need for sharp observation of it. The second asks for an account of what the students may have felt about the dance. If teachers habitually focus discussion on the second question, students' observational skills remain undeveloped, since the responses being called for are constrained by individual likes, dislikes and past emotional experience. Now suppose one of the students, Tom, says "I liked it, it was very good. It made me feel happy." Responses such as this are likely even when the question asked was "What did you see?" But what has Tom accomplished with his answer? He has stated an aesthetic judgement (that the piece is a "good" one) and given a psychological report of his happy feelings. According to Smith, such a response is sufficient **when the students' comments amount to praise of the dance**. Yet the dance has in fact never been evaluated at all when the only commentary offered consists of psychological reports. As Bertram Jessup (1960) puts it in "Taste and Judgement in Aesthetic Experience": "Inadequate response may also be described as failure to respond to the work as object and to use it rather as a trigger to set off memories, feelings, and sentiments which are related to the object only by psychological ... eccentricities of the individual beholder. In that case the taste is directed not upon the object but upon the recalled and outside incidents and interests of the beholder's life". (p.58)

Now suppose Tom had said "Oh, I hated that dance! It was dull, I was totally bored." Again, he is offering no information about the dance, although he is reporting his boredom in support of his claim that it was dull. Here is where Smith would see fit to begin asking Tom questions pertaining **to the dance itself** ("If the answer [to the question 'Did you like it?'] is no, then probably reasons for its failure can be found by asking some of the questions [about the dance]"). But if an account of Tom's boredom justifiably provokes the use of Smith's questions about the work of art itself, why does his account of a pleasurable feeling not warrant their use? In both instances, Tom has merely made claims about himself, not about the dance in question. Asking students like Tom to formulate precise and cogent answers to the question "What did you see in the dance?" is of considerably more educational value to them than coming up with **any** possible answer to "Did you like it?"

Any passerby can watch a dance and answer the question "Did you like it?" It is a question which nearly always elicits an emotion-based response. If teachers are seduced by this, and neglect to bring class discussion back to the dance itself, it is unfortunate for students hoping that their educational experiences viewing dance will elevate them beyond the status of any passerby. It is also unfortunate for the choreographer, who begins to see that his work is being praised or denounced solely on the basis of others' claims of personal happiness or boredom.



Choreographers need to learn what specific aspect of their dances have brought forth particular judgements from observer/critics so that they may progress in their work. Students need to learn how to transform self-reflexive responses into critical statements that are of substantive value both to their colleagues and in their own future choreographic efforts. These needs cannot be satisfied unless and until students like Tom are taught how to provide reasons to support the judgements they deliver. When they are, Tom will be in a position to learn from **all** of the presentations in the choreography class, not just from the one in ten occasions when he presents his own work.

We have seen that "criticism" is defined in various and contrasting ways, and that it is shunned by some as threatening to a permissive educational environment just as it is embraced by others as a necessary component of students' artistic growth. There is little agreement on how to teach critical skills in the choreography class, how to apply them, and what it means to practice them. Where it is recognised that critical skills need to be taught, there is ambiguity about how to do so. More research is needed in the areas of defining critical skills, in testing their effectiveness as tools of the dance artist, and in developing appropriate pedagogical methods for incorporating critical thinking into the choreography course. Since, as Beiswanger said, the choreographer is "in the critic's seat, in the position of being his work's first viewer and judge," dance students need to be systematically trained in critical discourse. There is no better place for this to occur than in the choreography class, where there is a steady supply of student-created work just waiting to be discussed.

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