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The World is Dancing: A Review Essay

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Introduction

The idea that a process of globalization is underway – bringing about basic changes in human arts and affairs – is not new. Marx and Engels recognized it in 1848, when they wrote in *The Communist Manifesto* about a “constantly expanding market ... [that] must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere.” Marx and Engels knew that they were witnessing the emergence of a global marketplace: a worldwide system of production and consumption that disregarded national and cultural boundaries. Like Marx and Engels, the early 20th century Russian-born ballet impresario, Sergei Diaghilev, welcomed the move toward internationalism, not only for the increasing wealth it produced but also because he recognized it could offer artists unparalleled opportunities to create, collaborate, and gain worldwide acclaim and influence. For twenty years, his “Ballet Russes” toured the world, creating a sensation everywhere and invigorating the arts of dance, music and scenic design in its wake. Diaghilev brought his extravagant ballets to large and small venues: he did not try to

understand the diverse audiences or simplify the productions for them. It was elitist education by elite example and, by all accounts, the local elites loved him for it.

Reading Shapiro's recent edited volume on dance and globalization, one suspects that she would not welcome an association with Diaghilev. Diaghilev's artists required the very public proscenium stage to impress and inspire. Shapiro seems to prefer artists, educators, researchers and writers who invoke nuance and reflexivity, residents of more intimate, interior spaces. Diaghilev exported ideas, transmitting aesthetic ideals and reveling in his status as cultural ambassador. Shapiro imports ideas, challenging aesthetic ideals and interrogating cultural values even as she envisions a global aesthetics and universal ethics. It may be said that the present collection of essays on dance is more Isadora Duncan than Sergei Diaghilev. There is perhaps some truth to that notion. And yet, I find in both Shapiro and Diaghilev a uniquely defining feature: they are enablers. They bring dance to people (and visa versa) as a way Shapiro says, "of affirming specific cultural traditions and experiences and as a means of expressing the universality of our humanity" (p. ix). These are enablers of the highest order, with an uncommon ability to bring together intelligent, creative individuals who can contribute significantly to a shared vision. (In contrast to, for example, Isadora with her company of Isadorables.) This is not to say that the present project is entirely successful. Still, what this volume represents – a manifest passion for dance in all its forms, willingness to challenge norms, and desire to engage a larger, indeed global, dance community in dialogue – has much to recommend it.

In her preface to *Dance in a World of Change*, Shapiro states her goal clearly:

At the center of this work is the desire to provide those engaged in dance education with a text that expands the discourse and curriculum of dance to connect it to the critical, political, moral, and aesthetic dimensions of our contemporary social situation. (p. ix)

The contributing authors tell us stories, make arguments, and reveal dance, dancing, and dance-making as ways of world-making on a global stage. It is a volume that is *literally* all over the map. It includes contributions from dance educators, choreographers, critics and scholars reflecting on their experiences in South Africa, Brazil, Croatia, Ireland, Canada, Taiwan, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Holland, Jamaica, and the United States. Shapiro begins with a helpful, if brief, preface that keeps the book from being *figuratively* all over the map. She frames the work as a four part 12 chapter volume. The chapters within each part are connected by a broad theme (e.g., *challenging globalism*). At the end of each of the 12 chapters, she adds a "reflections" piece, summarizing important points and elaborating on key ideas. I found these briefs helpful, informative and often insightful. Each of the four parts ends with a list of "reflective questions," a useful nod towards the educative intent of the

volume. The four parts are tied together loosely in an attempt to, as Shapiro says, “extend the conversations and show that there is more to the phenomenon of globalization that is shaping the future of dance” (p. x).

And what a wide-ranging conversation it is!

Part I, “Dance as Cultural Memory: *Challenging Globalism*” introduces the reader to the intersection of local and global trends, reminding us that *glocalization* by definition refers to the individual and community that is willing and is able to “think globally and act locally.” In Chapter 1, *Stepping into Footprints*, Michael Seaver argues convincingly that traditional Irish dance and the mega-hits of “*Riverdance*-type spectacles” variety are instances of the local and global as two sides of the same coin, where a place like Ireland today may be better understood by recognizing the continuum nature of glocalization rather than a unidirectional globalization. Even as he unpacks those weighty ideas, Seaver provides edifying lessons on Irish history and cultural politics.

In-depth cultural analysis continues with Ivancica Jankovic’s essay *The Quest for Preserving and Representing National Identity*. This second chapter provides a portrait of Croatia’s struggle with feelings of national inferiority and the implications for the art of dance and dance education. Her description of the work and influence of Ana Maletic and the Zagreb School of Contemporary Dance is reminiscent of the “Great man” theory – or, as is more often the case in dance, the “Great woman” theory – that aims to explain history by the impact of highly influential individuals. Reading Jankovic, it is hard to imagine the development of Croatian contemporary dance apart from Ana Maletic’s vision and application of Rudolf Laban’s work.

Chapter 3 brings us to Christopher Walker’s Jamaica in *Dance Inna Dancehall*. Walker is aptly named, for he takes the reader on an astonishing walking tour through Jamaica’s cultural heritage. He is a gifted, detailed observer and describer of movement and dance. His account of Jamaica’s dancehall past and present scene, and his remarkable movement descriptions, are among the finest depictions that I have ever read. One imagines that Walker is also a very good dancer, because he seems to know what it takes to “mek dem know him dancing live on.”

Part II “Politics of Belonging: *Disrupting the Norms*” explores the notion of difference and the perils of a culturally homogenizing world of dance. This section begins with Lucia Matos’ *Writing in the Flesh*. In her discussion, Matos examines four Brazilian contemporary dance groups that mix dancers of different abilities and recounts her experience as critically informed audience member at the Festival Arte sem Barreiras 2002 (Art Without Barriers Festival 2002). Matos is at her best when she shifts from theorizing “difference inscribed in

the flesh” to situating her ideas in concrete descriptions of the choreographic vocabularies that take (or fail to take) difference as a point of departure. Her critique is clear, cogent, and illuminating.

In Chapter 5, *When Boys Dance*, Doug Risner examines some of the “dehumanizing discourses on the male dancer and their continued implications for boys who dance.” Risner has made a career out of mapping this largely uncharted area and it’s good to read what amounts to a review of his research on the topic. As a male dancer, I resonate with much of what he finds and defines. Like a good researcher, Risner raises more questions than he answers, but that may leave some readers (like me) wanting to hear what he thinks a more humanizing dance education discourse might sound like.

The last chapter in this section, Lynn Maree’s *Acts of Love Under a Southern Moon*, is an enigma. Her stated purpose is to describe the dance and dance education scene in Durban, South Africa. As tour guide, Maree does a fine job pointing out the relevant sights to see, such as the God’s Golden Acre project, the African Music and Dance Programme at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, “Dudlu Ntombi: Arise iMvemvane” girls project, not to mention all the individual artists and companies in this obviously vibrant place. But, as a visitor, I felt like I never got off the proverbial bus, never got to unpack my bags and see the city at ground level. More insight into the context (and subtext) of this locale would have added depth to an otherwise brief introduction to the cultural institutions of this remarkable place.

Part III “Conversations on Dance for a Multicultural World” focuses on personal stories in dance education and descriptions of experiences with schoolchildren in Canada, Finland and Taiwan. Ann Kipling Brown’s *Common Experience Creates Magnitudes of Meaning* takes the reader on a uniquely personal journey through her life and life’s work. Kipling Brown is a highly respected researcher, writer and dance teacher educator, and her story is instructive. Her passion for dance and love of teaching is evident in her optimistic outlook for the future of arts education.

In Chapter 8, Eeva Antilla gives us *Dialogical Pedagogy, Embodied Knowledge, and Meaningful Learning*. I found this chapter to be one of the highlights of the volume. Antilla writes in a clear, simple, and utterly profound way about her conception and practice of a pedagogical approach she calls “dialogical dance education.” I teach in a university setting, and anytime I mention “pedagogical” and “dialogical” in the same breath, I can watch my students’ eyes glaze over. Antilla is my new antidote. I applaud her ability not only to theorize cogently but also to facilitate meaningful learning in the classroom. It is a delight to read how the relational and moral aspects of her curriculum sow seeds of “wide-awakeness” and appreciation in students’, teachers’, and parents’ lives.

The final chapter in this part, Shu-Ying Liu's *Transferable Theory* brings us back to more conventional issues, methods and research design. Liu describes a collaborative study undertaken in Taiwan of the cross-disciplinary effects of drawing and painting on dance making and understanding. The lessons are a combination of figurative and action representational tasks. The results are notable if unsurprising: dancing and painting are "reciprocal processes," where one art form can stimulate personal discovery and symbolic behavior in other art forms.

Part IV "Transcending Differences: *The Commonalities of Dance*" begins with Adrienne Sansom's *My Body, My Life, and Dance*, which celebrates the phenomenological account of becoming an artist and educator. This essay-cum-memoir includes extensive use of journal entries with a smattering of critical theory. Sansom explores the body as voice and examines dance as a site of "informative and political literacy." What tension there is comes not from astute criticism or argumentation, but from the author's experience of loss and recovery. It is a story that many dancers may share though perhaps too few express it so feelingly.

In Chapter 11, Ana Sánchez-Colberg's *Holds No Memory* chronicles a scintillating tale of creative collaboration between Efva Lilja, director of the internationally renowned Swedish dance company ELD, and Sánchez-Colberg, artistic director of British dance theater company Theatre enCorps. Sánchez-Colberg takes the dictum, "the nature of art is rooted in subjectivity," together with the reader on a joy ride, replete with unusual twists, profound (that word again) insights, and astute philosophizing. She provides perhaps the best summary of this book when she recounts a seminal experience at a post-performance discussion with Pina Bausch: "... after an audience member asked, 'What is the work about?' Bausch shook her head in disbelief, and expressing more a sense of frustration than an explanation, she replied (I paraphrase from my notes): 'Why should reality be understood intellectually, I don't understand ... look at the work, it is all in the work.' The statement became a kind of sense of environment that has remained part of a latent ecology that I carry with me ... *Bausch seemed to be asking us to reconsider our engagement with the work, not to seek what she had to say to us*" (italics mine). In her own way, Sánchez-Colberg requires no less from the reader.

The final work in the volume is Sherry Shapiro's Chapter 12: *Dance in a World of Change*. Shapiro seeks a "global view of aesthetics [that] recognizes diversity and acknowledges that there are multiple meanings of what dance is or what good dance is." This may not be the most profound sentence in her essay, or indeed in the book, but the sentiment is keenly felt. She goes on to make some interesting arguments about the need for universality in the face of the particular and the nature of dance and the human body. More than anything else, what comes through is an exhortation of the artist's inalienable right to create, collaborate, and

influence the shape of things. Sound familiar? Shapiro may not be a wholly post-modern Diaghilev, but she certainly can communicate her ideas in compelling ways.

On the whole, I found this volume to be an enriching experience. Before you run out and buy it, however, let me make two critical points. First, as one reads through this volume, it becomes apparent that Shapiro and a number of the authors view their work through a specific ideological frame: what one might call a feminist-critical-pedagogy lens. Those of us who were in graduate school in the 1990s, especially in the field of education, are familiar with this particular epistemological stance and the ongoing debates attempting to reconcile critical pedagogy (Freire, 1972) with feminist thought (Ellsworth, 1989). These debates have taken their toll and, in the words of one commentator:

Current Feminist Pedagogy is at a crossroads. One force draws it to an ethnocentric foundationalist emancipatory commitment, while using postmodern rhetoric which negates essentialism, foundationalism and any sort of universalism and collectivism. A different force directs it to save some of the Enlightenment's ideals while criticizing central elements of present day's postmodern discourse and paying tribute to others ... Both versions of Feminist Pedagogy are philosophically problematic and politically dangerous, as they lack a general Critical Theory or a philosophical framework that will protect them from being drawn into a strategic-instrumentalist orientation, which by definition is fundamentally violent. In the absence of anti-instrumentalist and dialogical elements, they are drawn to serve and reflect the repression typical of other versions of strategic-oriented education. Feminist Critical Pedagogy and Feminist Pedagogy do not contribute to the advance of emancipatory counter-education and for an essentially more human reality (Gur-Ze'ev, 2005, p. 55).

If such jargon-laden analysis dims your enthusiasm for the topic, then *Dance in a World of Change* may feel overly fraught to you at times. But it shouldn't keep you from reading on. Feminist and critical pedagogy is a genuine political and philosophical challenge to Western hegemonic educational ideologies (Weiler, 1991). Shapiro and her likeminded colleagues make astute connections to dance. Moreover, they require only your attention, not adherence, to their cause. There are also authors in this volume who go their own way. This is an important philosophical point to be acknowledged here, since one could legitimately raise the specter of a "strategic-instrumentalist orientation" in any volume that implicitly (or explicitly) absents authors who frame the world differently. As editor, Shapiro walks her talk in this regard.

A more constructive and convincing criticism of this work can be found in the lack of conversation between and amongst the authors, which would make clearer the connections between chapters (and sections) and underscore the need of a global dialogue. The degree to

which an edited volume like this one succeeds as a whole depends largely on its ability to unpack individual experiences and ideas and then link them together in meaningful ways. Some editors require more within- and between-author interaction than others; for some authors, it can be useful to read, debate and dialogue with other contributors about the extant issues even as one writes. Shapiro has evidently substituted her reflections in place of a more muscular dialogue. This is unfortunate for the reader. A journey from Ireland to Croatia to Jamaica in the span of 60 pages, for example, can be bewildering at times with little more than a vague roadmap to follow. As it is, each chapter and section must rely on its own kinetic memory and powers of persuasion to make its way, effectively raising the difficulty level for author, editor and reader alike. I suppose the message is that you make the path by walking, as the saying goes.

Despite the missed opportunities, this volume has some real gems and I heartily recommend this remarkable collection of essays to general and special interest readers. I know of no other edited book on dance and globalization, no other volume with the range, diversity and reach of this one. One can easily imagine specific chapters making their way into university courses on feminist and cultural studies, dance education, history and theory. This book brings new meaning to an old Diaghilev saying: The world is dancing! *Dance in a World of Change* will broaden your horizon and show you how its being done.

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