

Contemporary American Folk Theories of Dancing—Part 1

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Quite a few years ago at a time when I was just beginning my lifelong love, obsession would be as appropriate, of dancing a Canadian colleague was teaching at CU as a guest. I'd known him for some years and found him a comrade in forging studies of religion that paid attention to the body. He is, and was at the time, a well-known student of ritual. We both attended African and other dance classes together and suffered the inevitable awkwardness common to midlife academics taking up a new skill. I don't now recall what motivated the exchange, but I do recall clearly the statement he made in our common correspondence that set me off. He wrote, "White men can't dance." Perhaps he didn't intend it as anything more than the use of a commonly known phrase used to describe our shared predicament: two white academic men struggling to learn to dance and feeling acutely aware of a deeply bodied awkwardness. I, however, took him seriously and challenged him on the statement calling him both racist and middle ageist! He, perhaps to goad me more, defended his position and we kept at each other for months (as I recall) after that. Since then I have become a dancer and can say that without embarrassment and he and I eventually parted ways.

The broad proposition of this course is that dancing is an important, even essential, cultural and religious action occurring in virtually every culture in human history. Yet, dancing is clearly undervalued, if not devalued, in contemporary American (and Western) societies as evident in its absence from public education, funded arts, and the many degrading valuations so commonly associated with dancing in popular opinion such as "it's just a dance" and "white men don't dance" and "dancing is for sissies."

It is notable that the views that are commonly and popularly held in contemporary American society regarding such things as dancing are typically considered to be true without question and universally held. In other words, we simply know the truth about dancing and that's that. We never question whether our popular views—what I'll refer to here as "folk theories"—are accurate, reflect all the cultures throughout the world and history, and serve us well by holding them without question. This is more or less the nature of the way we operate. Our folk theories are never seen as theories, but rather as truths, self-evident certainly because there is little to no dissension or question.

Folk theories often grasp aspects of a thing that are important and distinctive even if the way this thing is grasped is, under scrutiny, limited or misdirected. It seems important, before we launch into the consideration of the importance of dancing to cultures and religions throughout history, to begin with a review of some of those most common folk theories that we inherit, that we might acknowledge them as well as to make a few observations about them. We will find, as I will suggest, that most of our folk theories of dancing reflect the very values that distinguish the modern largely Christian west. Our understanding of dancing, seemingly so obviously universally true, is ethnically and historically specific and limited. There is certainly nothing at all wrong with this; that is after all the way all humans live in the world relative to their folk theories, but it significantly limits our study of dancing in cultures and

religions around the world if we remain ignorant that there is more to be understood than is in our own cultural/historical kit bag.

The immediate example is my own defensiveness related to being told that “white men can’t dance.” While there are limitations and, I think, insensitivities related to this position, it does reflect attitudes and practices we have in our culture related to men and dancing. You will find a lecture later in this series called “I’d Rather Throw Like a Girl, than Dance Like a Guy” which reflects my own experience as a dance teacher the tendency of the way guys dance in our culture. I then attempt to link this movement style to what some have referred to “the decline of men.” The popular movie and now the musical “Billy Elliot” also address this issue. So while I remain resistant to this “folk theory,” it does reveal something important about our culture and time that is important for us to know.

In this and the following couple of lectures I’ll lift out for exemplification and quick critical consideration a number of the folk theories that we hold. This, hopefully, will make us self-aware as well as to begin to appreciate how we have used dancing as a means of enacting cultural and religious values, even in the devaluing of dancing. Okay, let’s get going.

Dancing as Self-Expression

A few years ago I founded a world dance and music studio in Boulder and a studio that was operating at the time and endured a few years was named “Express Yourself Dance Studio.” Its name captured what is perhaps the most pervasive and common view in the last century in American, dancing is foremost self-expression, that is, we dance to express ourselves. This seems so natural as we view dancers of all sorts grooving to music in groups expressing their pleasure and camaraderie at night clubs, raves, and social venues where we see hoards of dancers grooving to music letting all their emotions and feelings flow through their movement. Yet, when we consider this common view historically and culturally we find that dancing as self-expression is a rather modern and western idea. In most cultures dances are cultural expressions, if expressions at all, and have a very clear signature in the form of movement of the specific cultural and historical time. Our understanding of dancing as self-expression correlates closely with the rise of modern dancing in the early part of the twentieth century when dancers, often dancing as individuals, rejected the regimentation of ballet and sought to express the new rising modernist sense of the importance of the individual. This is a complex history in itself; I’ll mention just a couple important American modern choreographer/dancers. Isadora Duncan developed a dance technique influenced by the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche and a belief that ancient Greek dance was the future. She developed a philosophy based on natural and spiritual concepts and she urged acceptance of pure dance as a high art. She created what she referred to as “free dance” which she performed wearing a simple tunic like the Greek vase figures that inspired many of her works. Then, a bit later, Martha Graham, whose father who was a psychologist, codified this idea as she explored the deep connections between mythology and dance. Her dances sought both psychological and mythological roots, particularly from a Jungian perspective, in her powerful contribution to the establishment of the signature forms of modern dancing. We’ll consider Graham’s work again later. Important for us now is to understand that while self-expression is perhaps our most unquestioned folk

theory of dancing, it is indeed an ethnic/folk theory, peculiar to modern western views, not an understanding of dancing that would be familiar to many cultures around the world. Basically understanding dancing as self-expression is an expression and an insinuation of modernity, the modern understanding that focuses on the importance of individual, individual expression, individual freedoms, women's rights, voting rights, and the interconnection of dancing with any influences at all, such as, other cultures, antiquity, philosophy, classical mythology, and psychology.

It is quite interesting and notable that given this bit of perspective when we look back at those examples from contemporary American culture that exemplify the view of dancing as self-expression, all the dancers are basically doing the same dance movement suggesting that their dancing is one of their cultural forms of expression and agency, the act of creating their specific sub-cultural identities by the specific forms of "dancing as self-expression" they elect to perform.

What is perhaps most important to appreciate in this way of understanding dancing is that as "self-expression" it certainly has to be experienced as highly important. Many of my students who express this idea indicate that they feel most fully themselves when dancing. I share that experience with them.

Dancing as a Language or a Universal Language

Dancing is a language, even a universal language, is a commonly stated idea. The same is as often said of music. Music and dance theorists have often addressed this idea and have rather thoroughly dismissed this way of identifying what distinguishes music and dancing. Few studies have been successful in analyzing the movement elements of dancing in the same terms one would analyze natural language. Those that have attempted this approach have become mired in complexity and vagueness. One simply cannot discover in dance movement anything that is akin to the phonology, morphology, vocabulary, and grammar of natural language. But we must ask ourselves, why then do we persist in making this statement? Despite my own efforts to be vigilant about the way I talk about dancing, I still find myself using phrases such as "movement vocabulary." Surely what we are pointing to in this statement about dancing is that we experience dancing as "meaningful;" we feel that we are "informed" somehow by dancings. Dancing may and often does evoke emotion and thus seems to *communicate* it to us. In the modern west we are well aware that the way we talk about meaning is in the terms of language and communication. When we know that things that mean are invariably based in language, then it seems only natural and obvious to refer to dancing as language. Furthermore, dancing has some quality that seems perhaps universally arresting to those who experience it; that is, we all tend to know dancing and to be engaged by it, even if we haven't a clue about its cultural context or the associated cultural and historical values. That we resonate with dancing, despite the comprehension of the specific dance, suggests then the universality of this language. This statement, this folk theory, then elevates dancing to a language universally understood grounded, perhaps, in the vocabulary that must be common to all people because it is comprised of movement of the human body. In this sense, there is some great wisdom in the statement, if at another level it is clearly misdirected, and that is that were it

not for some general, and indeed common, principals basic to all human movement because all humans share, more or less, a body common to all humans, we would have little hope of understanding dancing much beyond our individual body or the bodies of those closed to us. I'll focus a number of lectures on human movement.