

# Contemporary American Folk Theories of Dancing—Part 2

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## Dancing as Art and Entertainment

My granddaughter, as a great many girls in American culture, takes ballet along with a number of other forms of dancing. She and I have a holiday tradition of going to a performance of “The Nutcracker Ballet.” The winter holidays would not seem at all complete without our attending this ballet. In contemporary (and certainly not so contemporary) western cultures ballet is seen as “the dance.” I’ll have more to say of this later, but for now, it clearly represents “high culture.” To be properly “cultured” that is one who attains the proper values of culture one trains in ballet (well, that is, if you are female) and goes to the ballet (boys and men can be included here however often reluctantly).

Dancing is commonly understood as “art” and as “culture” in the sense meaning “high culture.” Here we mean primarily ballet and modern dancing, yet while modern dancing began as a rejection to the aristocratic and high culture associations to ballet, as it has matured throughout the twentieth century modern dancing progressively took on many of these same characteristics and has now partially merged with ballet to form “modern ballet.”

First, let’s look at a bit of classical ballet. It is a scene from “Swan Lake” with Gillian Murphy dancing the black swan.

Now, let’s look at a bit of modern dancing. This is a clip from Merce Cunningham’s “Beach Bird I” dance. Notice that he severs dancing from music and even when music is present the dancing seems not to be done to the music.

As these two forms come together they merge as “modern ballet.” Let’s look first at a montage of Twyla Tharp’s work. As one of the most successful choreographers today, Twyla has developed through post-modern dancing to a seamless merging of modern dance and ballet technique. This video overviews some of Tharp’s notable dances.

Next is an enthralling scene in Tharp’s series of dances set to the music of Frank Sinatra danced by Mikhail Baryshnikov.

The reluctance to embrace modern themes and modern technique in the context of classical ballet is a theme in the recent popular film “Center Stage.” The final scene is a multi-part scene that brings these themes and techniques to the traditional proscenium stage in New York City. This is a long scene. If you have seen it before, you’ll enjoy seeing it again. If you haven’t seen it, I trust you’ll enjoy it.

Ballet has indeed strongly influenced the techniques of modern as well as its sensibility. This is reflected in the venues where ballet and modern dancing are seen: grand auditoriums and venues that are constructed to “seat” a large well-dressed audience to be seen as they “observe” these dance

“performances.” These are not participatory forms and are distinguished above all by the term “high” and “art.”

Interestingly, dance forms from around the world have sought acceptance in these cathedrals of high culture and they often do so by co-opting the term ballet, as in “Les Ballets Africains” though comprised of Guinean dancers and musicians. It is notable that the Republic of Guinea is part of French West Africa so that the ideas related to ballet may well have been part of colonial presence in Guinea for a long time. This practice is used by cultures the world over.

Of course “art” forms of dancing are considered entertaining, yet there is a much broader understanding of what is included in the statement dancing is entertainment. Through many live performance venues as well as innumerable films and television, dancing has been a major form of entertainment through twentieth century America and continues to grow in popularity. Numerous books and documentary films have been made to survey this enormous body of dancers and types of dancing. Certainly no one has been uninfluenced by the endless tradition of great dancers that have filled the silver screen, theatres, and television throughout the twentieth century and, while in recent decades there has been a decline of dance films, they do persist, and they now pervade television media in the remarkably popular shows, “Dancing with the Stars” and “So You think You Can Dance.”

The “star” system developed in dance movies, but not so much, at least among the general public, for ballet and modern. The exceptions are Mikhail Baryshnikov and maybe Twyla Tharp and now Natalie Portman who stars in the amazing popular film “Black Swan.” Indeed, let’s look at a brief clip from this film. I always feel that the filming of most ballet and modern dances is done very poorly. The camera seems never to quite know where to look to convey the experience of the dancing. Yet, in “Black Swan” the camera becomes a partner in the ballet dancing, whirling and twirling around the dancers as they dance, giving the viewer a kinesthetic sense of the dance movement.

There are many well-known choreographers yet they certainly are not widely known to the general public.

The dancers that are known to the general public are the dancers that starred in popular films. The list is too long even to start, but I’m talking of dancers like Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, Gene Kelly, Bill “Bojangles” Robinson who often danced with the tiny Shirley Temple; this kind of dancer all the way to Michael Jackson. Well, the list is very long. I can’t resist a bit of video of Michael Jackson ... clearly the world’s most famous dancer of all times. When I was in Thailand, the young people all wanted to know if I knew Michael Jackson and they wanted to come to the US primarily to meet him.

### **Some Dancing has Ethnic Signature**

It is commonly expected that cultures that are somehow ethnically identifiable have dances that are distinctive to and representative of this ethnic identity. Even from early in the twentieth century the development of modern dances often looked to these so-called ethnic dances for inspiration often creating strange characterizations in posture and gesture that tend to persist such as the upraised angular arms and hands associated with Egypt, we even call them “Egyptian hands.”

The Bangles 1986 song “Walk Like an Egyptian” cemented this idea in our contemporary movement vocabulary certainly with the assistance of Michael Jackson who danced like an Egyptian in the music video. Let’s look at a little clip.

Costumed dancers are regularly featured on travel literature, as performances for tourists, and as representatives of countries in such things as Olympic opening and closing ceremonies where they become part of spectacle. It is common to name many dances by their ethnic identities even if these reflect broad geographical, rather than ethnic, demarcations. For example, we commonly identify African as a form of dancing and think of it as an ethnic distinction, simply ignoring that there are dozens of countries in Africa and hundreds of distinctive cultures with untold numbers of dances. In America, subcultural distinctions are often marked by specific forms of dancing, yet we tend not to see these as ethnically identified. The tradition of cotillion dancing as a means of social training for wealthy people of high social class is still practiced. Dancing at weddings is also still quite common featuring the newlyweds dancing the first dance. In this respect the seemingly innocuous practice of referring to some dances as “ethnic” tends to support the identity of “ethnic” with “minority” often with negative connotations. Joann Keali’inohomoku, a dance anthropologist, caused quite a stir when, in 1970, she published an article titled “An Anthropologist Looks at Ballet as a form of Ethnic dance.” Her point, rather obvious in a sense, is that all human beings are identified culturally in terms of ethnicity. Ballet has its own particular cultural and historical identity and thus simply cannot be understood in any other terms. However, quite compatible with western ideas ballet is commonly identified as “the dance” and as such would be understood as being foundational to all dances of all cultures and times. An empiricist idea to be sure.

Dances that are identified by their ethnicity usually are not found in social dance venues, but rather are danced in American settings in dance studio classes. One doesn’t go out African or Balinese dancing as one would go out salsa dancing or clubbing.