

Contemporary American Folk Theories of Dancing—Part 3

Sam Gill

Dancing as Sport

As a physical activity requiring extensive bodily training to acquire high levels of physical skill, dancing, it would seem, rather naturally aligns with sport and thus it is no surprise to find competitive dancing. As sport-type competition this form of dancing is also a popular form of spectator entertainment. Competitive dancing began in the early decades of the twentieth century, but developed into major international competition under the regulation of the World Dance Council which was established in the mid-twentieth century. Here's a bit of a clip of recent competition to give you a sense of this huge arena of dancing.

The formation and development of what is now known as Dancesport was at the center of the late twentieth century effort to get dancing accepted as a Summer Olympic Sport. In 1997 the International Olympics Committee recognized the International Dancesport Federation as the official representation for this effort. Here is a clip from a Polish DanceSport competition.

To date, however, competition dancing has not been recognized as an official Olympic sport. Sport dance competitions use the multiple round elimination structure common to sports tournaments often combined with the sports model of awards designated by the evaluation of a panel of judges. How important ballroom dancing may become to people was featured in the popular movie "Shall we Dance," originally a Japanese film, but then became an American film. Here is the hot tango scene with Richard Gere and Jennifer Lopez.

A very typical climactic number occurs in the film "Dance with Me" in which Vanessa Williams and Sharon do a tango that includes two guys dancing with Vanessa and the inclusion of breakin'. The strict rules that regulate competition dancing was the subject of the hilarious and hot popular Australian film "Strictly Ballroom." Both of these films also feature the theme of the so-called "ethnic" dancer paired with the trained ballroom dancer adding the much needed heart and flavor to what in a strictly rule bound dance form can become stiff and stilted.

The recent development of television dance reality shows like "Dancing with the Stars" and "So You Think You Can Dance," incorporates a combination of these sport evaluation forms, that is, they include a panel of judges who make so-called expert evaluations (yet clearly these are often more slanted towards entertainment value) and there is a progressive elimination process in which dancers are eliminated week-by-week until only the winner remains. Here dancing becomes spectacle, with audiences of millions watching these dance competition programs. Much might be said about the cultural values the enormous success of such entertainment programming reflect and express, yet the values are patently obvious: competition is valued as is the determination of winners and losers, the sense of real time drama is a valued shared cultural experience, the love of spectacle, and the sense of

audience participation where by calling in a vote everyone has an influence on the outcome. The dance competition model is easily adaptable and is used, for example, as a method of fundraising for local charity in such events as the YWCA sponsored “Dancing with the Boulder Stars” where votes are cast as a dollar per vote. Here is a video of me participating in this event.

These dance phenomena also engage another common understanding we have of dancing which is dancing as spectacle. There was a period in the development of the genre of dance films when filmmakers like Busby Berkeley set hundreds of dancers on stage at one time dancing including the spectacular overhead shots of endless patterns made by dancers that surely inspired Ester Williams, synchronized swimming and production numbers for television in the mid-twentieth century. Here’s a clip to give you a sense of this spectacle.

We also see the spectacles of dancing in Olympic opening and closing ceremonies. Dancing has become wildly popular in reality television commanding millions of viewers. The audience is captivated by the elimination structure of competition and by their participation in voting weekly to support favorite dancers. We can see so many coveted western values displayed in these shows: emphasis on the individual, hierarchy that distinguishes winners and losers, popular voting to determine the winners, experts stating their opinions, humor, personal drama, star personalities. This sport competition basis is not confined to reality television, it exists extensively at all areas of culture from youth dance competitions. Here is a video of a dance competition in which a group that my granddaughter, Fatu, danced in won a local competition.

And dance competition occurs in a variety of dance forms including “pom” to adult dance sport ballroom competition forms that bridge between social dancing, competition, entertainment, and sport. Here is a jazz pom competition piece.