

Dancing in University Education

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It was during one of my midlife crises that I rediscovered my body. I'd been an academic for decades sitting a dozen hours a day in a chair developing that pear-shaped body so distinctive to the academic. Fortunately I found my body in the context of dance and dance-based exercise. It quickly became obsessive for me. I was horribly out of shape and I had heard that it would take a month of active demanding exercise for every year of bodily dormancy to get in something like adequate physical shape. That proved accurate in that it did take about two years and I am so thankful that I wasn't greatly overweight and that I didn't have any physical problems.

At first my obsession with physical activity was so vitalizing that it distracted from my academic life. But eventually I began to ask myself why that was necessary. Having studied ritual particularly in the context of tribal or small-scale cultures as the focus of my academic life, it slowly dawned on me that a life of movement, indeed, a life of dancing, was central to the religions and cultures of the peoples I had for decades studied. Suddenly it seemed so strange that the academic study of religion should avoid the inclusion of dancing in the studies of these cultures. It is not that religion scholars and anthropologists didn't acknowledge that dancing was important, it was more that it was clear that as academics we really haven't had much of an understanding about how to go about understanding dancing. I think that this lack rests in the way we have understood education for at least the last 200 years as necessarily minded, rather than bodied. Our entire educational system from the earliest years of formal education, as I discussed in the last lecture, tends toward disabling and ignoring the body in some notion that this is necessary to the proper development of the mind. Note even the sound bites used to advertise CU "Minds to match our mountains." I was at the Toronto a few years ago and saw banners celebrating the University with the phrase "100 years of great minds." Furthermore, our academy and its views have developed under the significant influence of Christianity, which, as I have discussed in a former lecture, has seen little place for dancing. It is perhaps not accidental that the garb worn for graduation at educational institutions is remarkably similar to Christian liturgical garb. At perhaps the largest public ritual occasions in America, the ritualists wear garments that render the body inarticulate and appear as a sea of floating heads. Thus, it is little surprise that we are rather baffled by how we might understand dancing in other cultures even when we know that it is understood by them to be important, even essential to identity and to cultural and religious value. This course is the current phase of my efforts to overcome this bafflement and to construct a theory of dancing, an understanding and appreciation of dancing, which will serve the comparative and interpretive academic study of dancing in cultures and religions throughout the world. Yet, I am a rather "special ed" case in the context of the university. My senior rank is perhaps the basis of my being tolerated.

In Universities dancing is taught and studied in several areas. Recreation centers often offer dance based exercise classes, social dance classes, and popular dance forms such as hip hop and salsa. Dance history is sometimes taught in dance programs (more often programs than departments) in a course or two on ballet and modern. Dance programs, often part of theater, rarely offer more than MFA degrees

and these are confined largely to ballet and modern dancing. Some dance programs offer a few courses on some other forms—African—for example as reflecting the particular interests of a single faculty person. Ballet and modern are taught in university settings justified, most certainly, because they represent “high culture” and the history of elite western culture.

Most of the actual dance training for professional performers is not part of university dance programs, but rather occurs in dance organizations like Joffrey Ballet School, School of American Ballet, and the Royal Ballet School and under the influence of noted or renowned dancers. The most extensive writing on dancing is done by professional “dance writers” who work for dance organizations and journalism and criticism. Much can be learned from a review of Columbia University Press’s *International Encyclopedia of Dance* (2004) which covers mostly the history and analysis of western art forms of dancing despite its title suggesting the inclusion of dance forms the world over. The word “international” in the title might more adequately point to the inclusion of dance companies in non-western countries of ballet and modern dancing.

Academic programs in musicology and ethnomusicology are far more common than academic programs in the anthropology of dance (or dance ethnography). And indeed PhD programs in dancing are extremely rare while there are numerous PhD programs in music. In many universities, music is recognized by having not only a department, but often its own school, while dance is rarely even a department and resides commonly as a program in theater. Dance ethnography has largely been a byproduct of cultural anthropology and ethnography. This relative valuation reflects much about modern western cultural values.

If we compare dancing to music in terms of the identities of performers and creators, it is clear that dancers and even choreographers are often relatively anonymous compared with the performers and composers of music. For example, we are generally familiar with the composers of classical music, yet we would be hard pressed to name the composers of classical ballets. We can likely name key musicians that gave rise to entire forms of music and are familiar with pieces of music that they composed and performed. However, we don’t know what dancers originated popular forms of dancing (who invented the waltz?) nor do we have any way of even thinking about how to identify particular dances they performed. In the context of the “star” dancers that emerged in the era of the great dance films like Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers and Gene Kelley, we know their dances not by name (as we would a song or musical composition), but only roughly by association with a film or a scene in a film or a song that accompanied the dance.

Music notation is well established and most people learn to “read music” in grammar school, or are at least familiar with the concept of musical notation. Dance notation is something else altogether. Rudolf Laban developed a method of dance notation called Labanotation which is perhaps the most standard and widely used dance notations systems, but by no means the only one. Dance notation is not something one learns in grammar school, indeed, it takes months and years of training to become accomplished in dance notation. My mother had a piano bench filled with “sheet music” that she loved to play, yet, while she loved to dance and taught me dances like the Charleston, she didn’t have even a scrap of paper with a note about how to do these dances. While music can be learned from music

notation quite adequately, it would be a daunting task for anyone to learn a dance from Labanotation. These factors are essential to appreciate in understanding not simply the place of dance in higher education, but also for our efforts to come to appreciate and understand dancing more fully.

The study of dance in cultures around the world is confined primarily to a small subfield in anthropology called “dance anthropology.” It incorporates some dance ethnography, i.e., the recording and observation of dancing in cultures around the world, and some extended interpretive study of dancing. In terms of developing dance theory, in my view, this small field has made some efforts without this body of theory becoming well developed. Many of the scholars in this field are former dancers in western art forms of dancing.

Study of dancing in the academic study of religion, as suggested by my own story at the beginning of this lecture, is practically non-existent despite, as I will show, dancing being nearly synonymous with religion in a great many cultures. In the rise of the study of non-western religions in the late nineteenth and throughout the 20th century to the present there are mentions of dancing in studies of religion, but little theory or careful and deep analysis.

I suppose it is not surprise that the presence of dancing in higher education is entirely consistent with the broader valuations of dancing in American and European cultures.