

## THE TRANSMIGRATION OF DANCE FORMS. [1](#)

by

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The transmigration of dance forms from one territory to another or from one national space to another has been a constant phenomenon in the history of dance from antiquity to the present. This movement of dance forms across different historical imaginations, cultural textures and philosophical climates is indeed a very complex process. Also the subsequent transplantation of the transmigrated dance forms into the textural fabric of the new national cultural texture is a complicated process. Both these processes of transmigration and transplantation have serious philosophical and historical implications and effects on any self-conscious theory of dance. For instance, a particular dance form, say ballet, takes place in a national cultural context in relation and opposition to other dance forms, say, modern dance, folk dance, ethnic dance, religious dance, Jazz dance, and so on. In other words, all dance forms situated in a particular national territory are in contestation against each other not only for the national cultural space in which to realize themselves, but also for the aesthetic imagination of the people in that particular context. Dance forms constitute in relation to each other a system of hierarchical relationships.

When a dance form transmigrates from one cultural space and transplants itself into another, it leaves an 'old' system of relationships and enters into a 'new' system of relationships. Does such a dance form in the new context remain the same or does it take on a new configuration. Does it contest for a new position of greater dominance in the new system of hierarchical relationships, or is it content with its old position in the old system. What are the cultural factors or the cultural logic which facilitates the transplantation of a new dance form. All these issues and others which could be enumerated make clear that there is a dire need in the world today for a dance theory that theorizes dance forms as integrated national cultural systems imbedded within political systems and historical forms.

Such a theoretical perspective could possibly explain some intriguing things in dance history which we usually take to be natural: for instance, why has ballet which emerged from a particular region of Europe just before the advent of the Renaissance, hence at one time a regional dance (there is a dispute among dance historians as to whether it sprung from northern Italy or southern France), took on the hegemonic characteristics of permanency and universality. In practically all the national contexts in which it exists, especially in the European countries, classical ballet has commanded other dance forms to its supremacy and also to its possible superiority. Within a national territory, ballet has facilitated to it the best

possible dancing spaces, the most elegant halls or Opera Houses and supposedly the most enlightened and educated audience. Though modern dance has developed its own techniques and training forms, stretching all the way from the Graham technique through the Limon and Horton techniques to Fagan technique, it is usually argued for that the best training ground for modern dance is ballet training. Whence lies the supposed supremacy of ballet.

Is the commanding position of classical ballet explained by the fact that its diachronic structure of development was parallel to, and simultaneous with, the development of rationality in Western civilization. Or is it explained by perhaps the contention that the logical structure of the movement of ballet expresses and conveys religious mystical feelings which are so characteristic of humanity's relation to nature. Or is the reason to be located in the postulation that perhaps ballet has attracted greater choreographic talent than modern dance, though modern dance choreographers have been greater as a collective expression, rather than as individual talent, however great their talents. One cannot be tempted to identify ballet form necessarily with bourgeois order, for it predates the emergence of capitalism and has established its hegemony in post-capitalist societies, the Kirov Ballet and the Bolshoi in the Soviet union and the National Ballet led by Alicia Alonso in Cuba. Like religion and classical music, classical ballet seems to penetrate through all cultural barriers and political systems. In contradistinction with other dance forms, the dance form of ballet can transplant itself into a new cultural fabric, whereas other dance forms (with the exception of modern dance) seems to require the movement of its national people, and through them can take root in the new environment. For instance, one cannot imagine German folk-dances being transplanted in America without the immigration of German communities in America, and in fact, in a real sense, only existing among these communities.

Probably one of the most consequential effects of the transmigration of a dance form from one national context to another, was the transplantation of classical ballet into the Russia of the late nineteenth-century by Marius Petipa, the Frenchman (ofcourse before him there were rudimentary forms of ballet in this country). This not only totally revolutionized the structures of classical ballet itself, but also created the great tremors still being felt up to the present in the national system of dances in Russia. For sure, this transplantation entailed the dilodgement and displacement of other dances within the hierarchical system of relationships. Within class societies, dance forms within a national system invariably co-exist in hierarchical relationship. The persistence of the supremacy of classical ballet in a socialis society like the Soviet union, raises complex issues for perhaps another occasion. Perhaps the importance of the classical ballet creations of Petipa was in that they were created in a symbiotic relationship with the incomparable classical music of Tchaikovsky. The seeming supremacy and

permanence of ballet form may be explained by this unity of these creative forms. The tremendous effect of Petipa is naturally related to the fact that Russian society had been opening to the West since the time of Peter the Great.

The transplantation of a new dance form by Isadora Duncan in Russia in the early years of the twentieth-century had paradoxical effects in contradistinction to those achieved by Petipa. For the attempted transplantation of modern dance by Duncan in 1903, the new dance form invented by Duncan herself at the very time Petipa was working on Russian dance culture, was not to lead to the overthrow or dislodgement of ballet from its position of supremacy within the hierarchical system of dance relationships, but rather, the renewal of ballet form by Michel Fokine: in other words, Fokine made a revolution within Petipa's revolution, and not against it. That Duncan had a strong impact on the young Fokine can not be doubted. It is the paradoxical effect of this influence that has facilitated the endless debate among dance scholars as to the nature of the influence of the older modern dance dancer on the younger impressionable ballet choreographer. Against Petipa's classicism, Fokine constructed neo-romantic ballets. All these artistic duels were on the eve of the Russian Revolution.

After the revolution, though there were cultural fracas in the Soviet Union concerning the possibility of creating proletarian literature or proletarian music, but seemingly no one attempted to construct a 'proletarian ballet'. Perhaps Fokine's aesthetic revolution prevented the possibility of the need to attempt a political revolution against ballet dance. Again the resiliency of classical ballet form is to be noted. Modern dance did not seriously take root in the changed political and cultural climate to challenge ballet. This contestation, or lack of contestation raises a series of theoretical issues which are not of immediate concern here. After the Russian Revolution both Michel Fokine and the young George Balanchine left their country to other pastures in America and in Europe.

Perhaps part of the explanation that Isadora Duncan was able to effect the invention of modern dance within the system of dance relationships in America, was the absence of a strong ballet culture which could have put up a more resolute resistance. What role the Native American dance forms played in this epoch making event is still unclear. Duncan effected an invention not in direct contestation against other modern European dance form. But then there was a presence of black American dance forms tracing their ancestry from Africa although having evolved within the American cultural space. A dance theory that articulates various dance forms, though differential in range and scope, as an integrated national system can be better clarify the complex phenomenon that takes place when a new dance form emerges. In American dance history, the beginnings of ballet culture is dated with the arrival of George Balanchine in 1933 in fulfillment of an invitation from Lincoln Kirstein. For a decade or more

ballet had serious difficulties in transplanting itself in the American cultural space. It is only after the Second World War, when the surrealists, the dadaists and cubists had immigrated to America (before the outbreak of hostilities), that ballet took root in New York City, and subsequently spread itself out unevenly across the American cultural landscape.

It was in America that Balanchine effected a neo-classicist counter-revolution against the neo-romanticism of Michel Fokine. Balanchine founded the New York City Ballet and Fokine established the American Ballet Theater, both within the same city. Balanchine was creating ballets which were not concerned with external realities, but about their own stylistic formation and their own intimate relationship with music, for Balanchine on occasion worked very closely with Stravinsky, as much as Fokine worked on certain occasions with Prokofiev.

The emergence of great ballet culture in America has been hand in hand with the presence of premier modern dance choreographers like Cunningham, Graham, Limon and others, and also the presence of first-rate black American choreographers like Katherine Dunham and Alvin Ailey. This complex American dance landscape makes clear the necessity for a dance theory that articulates the differential moments and the differential structures of the various dance forms within an integrated national dance system. [2](#)

[1](#) This essay was commissioned by Tanz Aktuell in 1988 but remained unpublished.

[2](#) This essay inspired by Edward Said's essay, "Travelling Theory", in **The World, The Text and The Critic**, Faber and Faber, London, 1984, pp.226-247.