

One World of Dance

Ann Hutchinson Guest

President
Language of Dance Center London

It is the variety in the dances of different cultures around the world that make them so fascinating. In some dances the steps are earth-bound, while others make use of high, vigorous jumps of different kinds. In one culture, dance features intricate hand gestures, in another it is the articulation of parts of the torso that is the focus. We see dances in which bare feet articulate delicately as the foot contacts the floor to take a step. In complete contrast there are dances in which hard shoes are worn and rhythmic stamping on the floor is important. The differences seem endless, yet - just stop to think - on what are all these differences based? We deal with the same elements - the body, space around us, timing, energy. But how are these basic elements selected, used? With regard to space, we see cultures in which the dancers remain on the spot; in others they travel, moving around the dance area, often in changing group formations.

Some dances are solos in which the performer shows off special skills; in other cultures we see group dances in which the participants remain close together, enjoying sharing the same simple movement patterns. We see couple dances in which the man and woman dance only with each other; in other countries couples change partners, dancing with another person and then another, eventually coming back to the original partner. Some group dances have intricate floor patterns; in such cases the steps used are usually simpler.

Around the world, costume plays an important part in the dancer's stance, and in the movements chosen. How are the dancers dressed? How do their

movements relate to what they are wearing? Do their dances make use of a part of the clothing? Consider the very long sleeves in Chinese and Mongolian dance, or the expressive use of the skirt in Spanish flamenco dance. Are they handling objects? For men, these may be sticks, and the dance may represent work patterns, or it may be a war dance, performed with high energy. A stick may be used to hit the floor rhythmically, or to hit the stick of a partner. In contrast, if the object is a fan, focus will be on the delicate movements of the fan itself with gentle body movements accompanying the fan patterns. The kind of objects that are held and how they are used distinguishes one culture from another.

We could continue surveying the many dance cultures around the world and begin to wonder "Are peoples really all so different?" Fundamentally we are not, we all have the same basic material to work with, it is just that the choices made of what basic ingredients to use and how they are combined are different. Differences also lie in the choices in timing and in the use of energy, the dynamic quality of movement. These selections reflect the personality of different peoples.

Let us look at the basic materials of dance. What is common to us all? What are the elements? We learn dances, we enjoy performing them, but do we know what they contain, what they are made of? All dances are composed of a comparatively short list of actions, the basic "building blocks" of movement, or, as some of us like to call it, the basic **Alphabet of Movement**. It is this basic list that all dance has in common. When we look at movement, the first thing to be aware of is that a movement is happening. Or there is a pause, a stillness, an absence of movement. If there is movement, what kind is it? Is it an anatomical action? That is, one of the family of movements based on the way the body is built. Because of our muscles and body joints, we can flex and extend our limbs and the spine. We can also rotate, turn, or twist the body segments. These three basic movements - flexion, extension, rotation - used in combination produce an amazing number of intricate movements.

But not all movement is focused on such flexion, extension, and rotation, Consider the very familiar activity of walking. We are able to walk because our legs have joints which flex and extend. For each step, the hip, knee and ankle, need to be in action, but we do not focus on these joints, we often are not even aware of what the legs are doing, because our only concern is to move in space, to cross the room, to travel. This traveling, moving from one place to another, is an important basic activity and needs to be on the list of movement actions. In a similar way we can only

jump, spring up off the floor and return to it because our legs can flex and extend. But the focus of a jump is on the springing action and the many possible variations. Springing is therefore an important basic action which appears in many different forms in dances around the world.

The directions into which we move are important. The build of the body has provided us with the main directions of up-down, forward-backward, side right-side left and there are many intermediate points. Twists in the body, the torso, provide richer directional variations. The category of direction must also include the area in which we move. Is there an audience? Or do we dance for ourselves? How the dancer's personal movements relate to the area or to the audience is significant and important for a particular style. Another significant factor in distinguishing dance styles is how we relate to the pull of gravity. Do we fight against it with constant uplift, as in western classical ballet? Or relax and give in to it to the degree that we feel the weight of the body as in Polynesian and African dances. How is our weight placed? On what part(s) of the body are we supported? Is balance on one foot featured or intentional falling included?

Stepping, supporting on the feet may not have the purpose of traveling, the many variations in placement of the feet, the speed, emphasis, the rhythm, and the repetition provide remarkably different patterns which can be recognized as belonging to a particular culture. The relationship between performers, between two people or several can be important. The performers may face each other, or stand side by side, or constantly changing the relationship. A dancer can relate one part of his/her body to another, one hand may relate to another, as in clapping, or as in a German Schuhplattler dance, slapping the thigh or calf. For similar rhythmic expression, a tambourine may be held and struck, as in an Italian Tarantella, or rhythms made audible with castagnets, an important feature of Spanish dance.

The forms of relating to a person can start with only a slight involvement and progress to greater involvement. First there is the simple action of looking at, or addressing a person or an object. Looking at a person, often a partner, occurs in many dances. Relating may be movement toward or away. Approaching can result in being near the person, standing close by them. Contact, touching comes next, this may be a hand on a shoulder. A greater involvement may be a grasping contact, as in taking hands with a partner, or the male grasping his partner's waist. This can be seen in many European folk dances which may also include supporting, carrying, the man lifting the woman. The form of contact may be momentary or may be retained

for some time.

In handling objects, the manner of holding the object may change, it may be passed to the other hand; if it is a stick it may be held by the fingers or under the arm. Within Japanese dance styles, the manner of holding the fan, the sensu, may change frequently. Forms of relationship can appear and change while the dancer is moving around the performance space and, at the same time, performing movements within the body. Dance can indeed be very complex, but it can also be very simple, as in dances featuring performers in a line all doing the same repetitive steps and the same simple torso movements, with no arm involvement at all.

This exploration of the basic movement possibilities could go on into greater depth. But that is a study which is best done through personal physical experience. Observing is valuable, but nothing can replace actually performing the movements. In such a learning process it is valuable to link the appropriate terms (the words) to the movements. Even more valuable is to learn the written signs which represent these basic movements.

With a background in this movement language, this **Language of Dance**, the dance observer, the researcher, has the tool with which to pin point the key features in a piece of choreography. Every choreographic composition includes many movements, many details of style. One evaluation could focus on the patterns of dynamic qualities which produce the particular style. Is the quality predominantly a gentle control for the gestures and steps. Are there strong accents with significant pauses in between? Are there arm or body swings making use of gravity? What is the characteristic use of space? How do the performers move in the available area? What is the predominant use of directions for the torso and the limbs of the body? Do symmetrical patterns dominate? Or are asymmetrical patterns featured? Such main features can be captured quickly on paper, and referred to later when a formal assessment may be needed.

World communication about movement would be possible if all concerned had this same understanding of the fundamentals of movement, the same vocabulary, the same symbolic representation on paper. We are separated by our verbal languages, but our movement language, our **Language of Dance**, can be understood by all. In dance academies where all the teachers know Labanotation, they use this common language to discuss movement questions, to clarify movement ideas. The same is true of LOD which provides younger and older students with a movement knowledge and language they can share. It is an exciting experience to observe young children of 5

or 6 performing their movement sequences, discussing their movement ideas and comparing their written dance sequences. Once they have physically experienced the movements and have names and symbols for them, they then “own” the movements and fully identify with them. They have found the enjoyments and the rewards of **The Language of Dance**.