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Congress on Research in Dance Keynote Panel at 2000 Feet: A Celebration of World Dance, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, June 19-25, 1999

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Reports

Congress on Research in Dance Key-note Panel at 2000 Feet: A Celebration of World Dance (*Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, U.S.A., 19-25 June 1999*)

For a week this past summer, Philadelphia—downtown, surrounding neighborhoods, and even nearby towns—experienced an explosion of dance activity that included performances of companies from around the world, exhibits of dance photographs, previews of dance films, lecture-demonstrations of dances from a breathtaking range of times and places, master classes in a similar range of dance styles, discussions, panels, and paper presentations by eminent figures in dance performance, education, and scholarship. Led by Susan B. Glazer (University of the Arts) and Pearl B. Schaeffer (Philadelphia Dance Alliance), with Sharon Friedler (Swarthmore College) as performance coordinator, a team of conference planners put together a stimulating and inspiring week of total dance immersion.

This report will focus on the contribution to that event of the Congress on Research in Dance. In its keynote panel, organized by Lynn Matluck Brooks, four outstanding researchers in their fields reviewed the status of dance scholarship to date and discussed possible trajectories for the future.

After a brief introduction of the panel members by moderator Dr. Lynn Brooks, Dr. Sandra Minton started the proceedings by presenting a condensed yet fairly comprehensive profile of contemporary dance research. Minton started with a general overview of the field, particularly as it is defined and categorized at the intersection of traditional academic disciplines with dance in-

terests and content: dance anthropology, psychology, ethnology, sociology, and so on. She outlined basic methodological approaches and, in keeping with her broad-based introduction, briefly discussed problems which dance, considered for her purposes here as a more universal phenomenon, provoked for those engaged in research. She then turned to a more specific examination of dance research in the areas of health, science, and education. Her particular interest, fueled by her own more recent experience, was an important and, in her opinion, necessary shift in focus towards populations underrepresented in dance research to date. Although the information could be culled from the extremely useful handout, Minton's projected charts of statistics were quite effective in underscoring how little work has been done with groups ranging from retirees to handicapped persons to prisoners. Even within the more well-researched area of dance in education, certain populations—such as elementary students and college students—were represented disproportionately in relationship to other groups such as preschoolers. Minton's findings suggest that, despite the growing body of dance scholarship, the extension of the traditional scope of dance studies into less considered areas will continue to require well-trained and sensitive researchers, capable of recognizing these groups and their dynamics as potential subjects of study, and willing to take the initiative to move towards a deeper and richer understanding of dance as a human phenomenon.

Deborah Jowitt, like many contemporary critics and historians, laments that a misconstrued yet persistent evolutionary model still holds sway in so much analysis and teaching of dance history and criticism. Dance forms and styles do not, she assured us, die out only to be replaced by some superior form. Time may progress in a neat and lin-

ear fashion but dance forms, events, and styles, while they may dissipate or disappear, may also recycle, persist, recreate themselves, mutate, and so on. Dance writing, she suggests, must be viewed in this light. Good and bad historical research and writing are not determined solely by the progress of time, as is clearly indicated by the presence of excellent (and less than excellent!) work in the earlier as well as later decades of this century. Mary Watson and John Martin, writing during the birth throes of modern dance, were evaluative and prescriptive; Denby, faced with the abstractionism of Balanchine, was forced to find a new way to write about a dance style which had neither plot nor characters; Jill Johnston, though anarchic in voice and style, functioned, wittingly/willingly or not, in the very traditional role of an authority on a particular period and place in western dance history; saturated with more postmodern notions of regionally and individually constructed interpretations of works, some recent writers turned to description as a tool for critical reception or historical writing. In addition to the writings of critics, Jowitt also used several historical works as examples. The fact that these particular writerly approaches appeared chronologically is not an indication that the successive writers were/are somehow more competent or legitimate than those preceding them. Rather, Jowitt suggested, it is more useful to evaluate or utilize these writings as perspectives and styles that resonated in particular ways to the dance work that took the stage at that time. What also, for Jowitt, characterizes the value of such work to the body of dance writing is a clarity of concept and language which, nevertheless, does not minimize or reduce the richness or complexity of the phenomena. As she both indicated and advocated, avoiding elitist and often exclusionary jargon need not compromise a writer's ability to offer analysis that is complex and insightful and which contributes to a deeper understanding of dance by a poten-

tially broader audience.

In a conference celebrating the international life of dance, Adrienne Kaeppler cut straight to a blunt reminder that "dance" is not only a Western term but also, in many cases, a Western concept. She suggested that it might be more illuminating instead to consider and to research the structured movement systems of humans and to understand that these activities in which human bodies are manipulated in time and space are cultural forms as well as important systems of knowledge. Without pushing the parallel too far, she suggested that these human movement systems have a grammatical nature—that is, they have structure, style, and syntax. They are intentional, meaningful, and open to interpretation. Human movement and gestural systems are, perhaps, more like poetry in that the language of both is formalized and also intensified. Kaeppler went on to define dance anthropology and ethnology, branches of dance research which are similar in that they both observe and analyze relationships between human movement systems and culture. Although the focus in neither is unidirectional, they can be distinguished from one another to some extent in that dance anthropologists study these intentional and formal systems of movement to better understand culture, while ethnologists, in a sense, use the cultural context to illuminate human movement and gesture. Looking to the future, she called for increased attention to and competence in an ethno-analysis of human movement and movement systems in each of our own cultures, and for a study of movement theory and philosophy of movement from within a society's perspective—a scholarly pursuit already underway in countries ranging from Ghana to Korea and in the home cultures of several audience members whose work she graciously acknowledged.

Ramsey Burt went on to remind us that not only is "dance" a Western concept but that it is one often informed by outmoded

and not particularly effective analytic approaches which some dance scholars, nevertheless, seem loathe to abandon. As an example, while acknowledging the importance and the logic of basing dance research of the last decade on the politics of identity—that is, framing studies from the perspective of race, gender, class, and so on—he cited as more productive the work of contemporary theorists whose observations, analysis, and writing are post-identitarian in form or content. Earlier dance artists and/or writers often focused on dismantling particular discriminating signifying practices and their concomitant ideologies and discourse. In hindsight, he suggests, it is possible that they often not only labored under the illusion that new forms were free of old values but also, in their intense focus on a particular ideology, may have shortchanged the work. As an example of a newer, more complex, and inclusive study, he cited Ann Cooper Albright's analysis of Blondell Cummings' *Chicken Soup*, a work which had been frequently critiqued as a dance concerned with black female identity, but which, as Albright and, in fact, Cummings suggest, is far more fluid and complex, including and eluding identity(ies) on several levels. Reminding us of social philosopher Foucault's admonition to "think differently," Burt suggests that we reconfigure our research around new concerns, and that one possible approach is to construct models of analysis and understanding that are political in their resistance to dominant discourses and inscribed ideologies, and yet fluid in their refusal to reduce the complexity of performance to one dimension or to fall back on the comfort of a singular and unified identity.

The many ideas presented were expanded in a dynamic audience discussion which included several strands:

- the application of dance education models cross-culturally;

- the presence, or absence, of men as subjects in dance research;
- the relationship between the performer and observer in the performance and analysis, as well as the understanding of the significance of the dance for all parties concerned;
- the continuing institutionalization of a body/mind dichotomy as evidenced, for example, in the frameworks utilized by the National Endowment for the Arts and National Endowment for the Humanities in consideration of project applications: the NEA accepts only applications for "creative" work, while the NEH restricts its domain to a particular and limited definition of "scholarly" research. Several audience participants noted that this practice was absolutely unreflective of the work and perspective of more experienced as well as newer generations of dance artists/scholars;
- the relationship of dance to contemporary theory, a question which covered such considerations as whether or not recent dance theory simply replaces one totalizing scheme with another more to its liking, and the issue of whether or not dance, itself, is theory.

The three-hour period allotted to the panel proved hardly time enough to cover the range of ideas, questions, and discussion stimulated by this panel. As was the case with the entire week-long 2000 Feet Festival, attendees left this particular session with new vistas to explore further for themselves.

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