

REVIEW ARTICLE

TO DANCE IS HUMAN. Judith L. Hanna. 1979
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 327 pp. \$14.95 (cloth)*.

After rejecting Sachs and Langer because their early theories are "culturally western and thus of limited value for the broader study of dance"; discharging Lomax's "armchair worldwide study" because the small sample does not "provide valid conclusions"; dismissing the work of Kurath, the founder of dance ethnology, as "valuable as far as it goes"; acknowledging Keali'inohomoku's "useful dissertation" as a generally "static theory of dance" and Royce's "introductory text" as an improvement, yet one that still "slights some critical social science perspectives"; and ignoring the recent state-of-the-art work of Kaeppler, the author informs "newcomers to the social sciences" that they "may choose to begin their odyssey toward understanding dance in human life with this text" (p. 256, n. 7). I am suddenly happy that I am not a newcomer.

This text comprises an introduction and eight previously published essays, some of which appeared in Current Anthropology (1979). It is unfortunate that Hanna did not heed some of the CA criticisms then. In chapter I ("Introduction") she criticizes anthropologists for ignoring dance in the past mainly because of their male bias and puritanical ethic. I am not aware that dance was ignored, and Catlin's O-kee-pah is hardly puritanical, but Hanna's sketchy bibliography may account for why she thinks it was. Most dance research of the Western hemisphere is omitted. The author promises that she will provide a holistic approach covering the four fields of anthropology (for some, an outdated notion), and that each chapter will be "rooted in a dynamic communications model" (p. 13). Not being happy with previous definitions of dance, Hanna, not unsurprisingly, provides her own, one which she calls "an over-arching analytic definition"; dance is human behavior "composed from the dancer's perspective of (1) purposeful, (2) intentionally rhythmical, and (3) culturally patterned sequences of (4a) nonverbal body movements (4b) other than ordinary motor activities, (4c) the motion having inherent and aesthetic value" (p. 19). Somehow I expected more arch. There are too many catches: what is a "dancer's perspective", and why not a "cross-cultural" perspective? Dance is not exclusively "purposeful"; it also holds no monopoly on being "intentionally rhythmical"; what about running, swimming, bicycling? "Culturally patterned sequences" apply to every aspect of social relations. One would expect "body movements" to be "nonverbal", and sometimes "ordinary motor activities" (like walking) are important parts of dance. And what is meant by "inherent value"? The arch has fallen.

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This chapter also discusses "primeval" dance and of course we turn to Africa. A further consideration of "types of dance" leaves us with an aftertaste of jargonese, much of which may be appropriate for American theater, but hardly for dance writ large. For example, under "skill acquisition" (presumably, learning how to dance) Hanna tells us that there are two types: (a) "individual teacher", and (b) "class instruction" (p. 55). But almost everyone knows that most people learn to dance in an informal setting, that is, by imitation.

Chapter 3 ("Psyche and Soma") is about "psychobiological" bases of dance, and we anticipate an exegesis of the author's earlier discovery that dance may even have been significant in the biological and evolutionary developments of the human species" (p. 3, emphasis supplied). But after being drilled on numerous theories of brain laterality, tool-making, and the effect of dance on the autonomic system, the physical anthropological enterprise is quickly abandoned, and we are told again that "dance is culturally patterned"; and if that is not clear, we are presented with more jargon and a maze-like diagram of a processual model of "dance semiotics" (p. 79). If to dance is human, so far we have little to prove it.

Chapter 4 ("Dance Movement and Sociocultural Patterns") discusses among other things the "language-like features of dance" which include directional reception, interchangeability, arbitrariness, discreteness -- terms all so general as to be meaningless as useful distinctions. This chapter also provides a "semiotic" analysis of an Ubakala dance-play, a subject that the author unquestionably knows something about, but all we are given is the analysis without any description whatsoever. We learn however that dance is a medium of communication because it is "good to do" and "good to think". Obviously, some culturally Western ideas have merit, although those who thought of them are frequently miscited, e.g., Douglas, Leach and Lévi-Strauss, among others. Again in chapter 5 ("Dance and Religion") the author argues that "the study of religion has neglected the structural and processual importance of dance" (p. 25), and we are introduced to a potpourri of fundamental (and mostly discarded) structuralist and symbolist thoughts applied to both African dance and ballet. A photograph appears at the end of this chapter depicting Mikhail Baryshnikov caught "defying the forces of nature" in a ballet, appropriately titled for this chapter, "Le Sacre du Printemps" (p. 124). Strange that his photo appears -- for Baryshnikov to dance is superhuman.

Chapter 6 deals with politics and dance and provides what Hanna regards as an "archeological" analysis of pre-Cortesian Mexico. She challenges earlier assumptions that dance was historically harnessed to agrarian reform and suggests an alternate hypothesis that dance was a symbolic device to "reinforce social stratification" (p. 151). No one would seriously argue about this speculation, given that one cannot separate agrarian reform from stratification. But the analysis is hardly archeological.

Chapter 7 ("Warrior Dances") deals mainly with symbolic forms of aggression. By this time one is struck by the fact that most examples are either from American theater or Africa. A broader ethnographic base would seem preferable for a book that purports to right all the wrongs of earlier descriptive anthropology, and to do it holistically. Do we need a structural, symbolic, or semiotic analysis to understand the underlying significance of this constant juxtaposition of the "self-mastery" of the rigorous regimen of European ballet as opposed to the fight-or-flight spear shaking of masked Africa? Deep structure begins to run shallow.

Chapter 8 moves us to the "urban ecosystem of dance" where we are presented with a number of "proposition sets" that are supposed to help ameliorate the age-old problem of neglecting dance in the city. Perhaps it is here (1) that I began to (1a) realize that this (1b) book should have been called (1c) To Dance is Scientific; all humanism has disappeared, fatigued by constant exposure to figures, diagrams, tables, models, inflated language, and dynamic little arrows stuck in a quagmire of semiosis. Finally in chapter 9 we are given future directions and a recapitulation of just about everything that just about everybody has theorized about the universe -- as it all potentially pertains to dance research and communications. And at the end -- it could not be better -- there is a poststructural applause as a brilliant Derridean deconstruction of the author's text unexpectedly unfolds. The last person cited as an authority on the fact that to dance is human is Charles Darwin.

In general, much of what is arrogantly passed off as semiotics is an uncritical assortment of theories in physical anthropology, archeology, sociolinguistics, cultural anthropology, communications theory, structuralism, symbolic analysis, etc., ad infinitum. Dance is simply stuck onto these existing interdisciplinary theories as if it were a self-conscious appendage. Furthermore, there is a rather naive assumption that all these "theories" -- if they are that -- are somehow accepted by their respective disciplines as absolute, and that there is an agreement on just what "semiotics" is.

If dance has been underrated by social scientists in the past, this book may very well contribute to it being overrated by social scientists in the future. In the meantime, I recommend that newcomers begin their odyssey with Kurath, Kealiinohomoku, Royce, and Kaeppler before braving To Dance is Human.

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