

REPORT ON THE EIGHTH CONFERENCE
OF THE AUSTRALIAN ASSOCIATION
OF DANCE EDUCATION (AADE), 1991:
"DANCE - AUSTRALIA MADE"

The Australian Association of Dance Education (AADE) is a national network which provides a vital range of services to Australia's widely dispersed dance community. It received international recognition at the 1990 CORD Conference in Hong Kong when Allegra Fuller Snyder (University of California) recommended that those seeking to establish a world dance organisation should adopt the structure of AADE as the best available model.

Despite its title and its stated objectives, the AADE operates as a network for teachers and students of dance technique and performance and for professional dancers, rather than for those involved in dance-related education in any broad sense.¹ While national gatherings like this one in Perth (Western Australia) could provide opportunities for urgently needed debates about education, they function primarily as a forum for professional dancers and choreographers.

In Perth these people included Kai Tai Chan (One Extra Company in Sidney), Cheryl Stock (Dance North in Queensland), Chrissie Parrott (Dance Collective in Perth), and choreographers Graeme Watson and Robert Ray. The need to support Australia's choreographers and small dance companies was formally established as the major focus of the conference agenda. The opening was entitled "Choreography and Making Dance in Australia."

My main interest at the Perth meeting was in higher education in dance-related fields, particularly at the post-graduate level, an area which is poorly served in this country. The only programs presently available to students are conducted within faculties of Education in Sydney and Melbourne.² Current theoretical approaches in teacher education are therefore influential in determining the directions dance research will take and the career choices students will make in this field.³

A number of authors in recent years have written of their concerns about the marginalisation of dance activities in Australian cultural and intellectual life (Dempster, 1987, 1990; Gardner, 1987; Williams, 1990). This problem extends even to those sections of the community most likely to provide support to the arts and higher education.

There is no doubt that dance holds a marginal place in Australian culture. There must be few places in the world where the body as a site of meaning is so narrowly circumscribed in the dominant culture ... (Gardner, 1987:32).

Despite its relative popularity with Australian audiences, the ballet also suffers marginalisation. Robin Grove writes: "... my impression is that ballet is hardly a serious topic in the circles where books, films, painting, music, are accredited subjects of debate" (1982:212).

In the material that follows I will examine briefly some of the matters related to higher education which emerged from the proceedings in Perth: the challenges of cultural isolation; the exclusive focus on performance even in scholarly contexts; and the impoverished nature of the discourse of dance education.

Vast empty spaces and images of isolation have been recurring metaphors in Australian writing, painting, music, choreography and film-making. Cultural isolation is commonly viewed as a serious challenge to a dance community struggling with high transport costs and a low public profile. Cheryl Stock, director of the successful Dance North company in Townsville, northern Queensland, presented an inspiring account of her efforts to come to terms with these problems. Stock referred to "the positive aspects of isolation," which can be liberating. The members of her company enjoy the freedom to make radical political statements in their work, freedom from pressures, expectations and short-lived fashionable trends originating in distant urban centres.

Dance North celebrates distance by seeking much of its material within the local community -- from so-called ordinary people and the drama of their everyday lives. Choreographing in this context is a social act. Stock suggested that this approach is responsible for the emergence of a distinctive dance style from movement material in the local population, which includes the dances of Aboriginal societies. Chan and Watson were also enthusiastic about the contributions made by Asian and Aboriginal dancers working in Australian companies.⁴

Important questions arise wherever the dance idioms of very different social and symbolic systems are being combined. Is the variety and novelty of these postures/gestures sufficient in itself (as suggested by Chan), or do we need to understand what these actions mean and what they signify in their own language context? It might further be asked: How might these actions genuinely communicate anything to audiences if those performing them don't understand what they mean? Every cultural system has its own integrity and is structured by its own set of spatial and temporal concepts.

It was interesting that some of the dilemmas underlying these questions became a focus of tension for those attending the Perth conference. Misunderstandings arose when exponents of non-Western dance forms claimed equal status with their Western colleagues.⁵ It seems useful to pose questions arising from the hypothetical reverse of this situation: for example, how would the ballet

community view the appropriation of ballet movements by Balinese or Flamenco dancers? Even if they could be made to work visually, what would such additions mean?

Several speakers at the conference presented material about the dance forms of non-Western societies, (e.g., Andreatchio on Flamenco, 1991; Menon on Kuchipudi; Glasser on combining European styles with some idioms of black African societies). Each presenter stressed the central importance of dances as manifestations of whole movement systems within particular cultures and language groups. They saw the body of the dancer as a carrier of specific symbolic and indexical information. It was clear to those present that in these personalised instances at least, the dance forms described could not be adequately appreciated without some knowledge of their meaning in their original social context. It was also clear that a tremendous amount of scholarly research is waiting to be done in this field.

Glasser presented a moving account of her struggles to maintain a company with black and white dancers, combining European and African styles, in defiance of the laws supporting apartheid. In this case the movement system/language in which any danced action has meaning and significance is always known and understood by at least some of the dancers.

Despite the genuinely appreciative response these papers received, those present did not apply the insights gained in the context of unfamiliar cultures to their own experience of dancing in Australia. Ballet-related styles (classical and contemporary) are classified as an art form and all other dance forms are classified as 'folk,' 'primitive' or 'ethnic'. Keali'inohomoku (1969/80) and Williams (1991) have identified weaknesses in such classificatory distinctions.

A paper presented by a Perth historian on "Social Class determinants of the Dance Experience" illuminated the rugged working class contours of what was thought to be a bland middle class landscape by many of the people at the conference. Lynn Fisher suggests that the experience of working class and middle class dancers has differed in many respects, and that

... modern dance in Australia like in other countries, has a middle-class base.

The luxury of dance for 'art' rather than for a living was not an option for working-class girls in the '40s and '50s ... (Fisher, L., 1990).

The author asks questions which involve today's students: Do dance organisations continue to perpetuate class divisions? What social classes are represented by tertiary dance students?

A change of emphasis appears to have occurred within the life of AADE, from dance education to dance performance. Debates about dance education have been overwhelmed by the survival problems of small companies and the desire to attract hopeful young dancers into tertiary courses. The focus on performance means that the dancer's social world is structured by the category 'dancer' to a high degree. This simple division of humanity has far-reaching effects. As Epstein (1978) points out, it is a two-way process. In differentiating themselves they are also defining others -- non-dancers -- producing familiar us/them, insider/outsider oppositions which constantly reinforce prejudice and intolerance. These simple categories are related to the very marginalisation dancers are trying to escape.

Renowned virtuoso performers and choreographers (e.g., Duncan, St. Denis, Dalcroze, Graham and Cunningham) have dominated the historical and ideological structure of the dance profession and its movement techniques throughout the modern period (Fisher, G., 1990). This has developed into an attachment to the myths surrounding successful individuals and to the notion that only successful performers can have anything to say about dancing that is worth hearing. At base it is also a sign of an attachment to middle class cultural values and to an identification with the iconic figure of dancer as artist.⁶

The focus on performance finds expression in dance education as an unwillingness to attach real value to scholarship and in-depth research. This bias is inevitably passed on to students. Not every student achieves a professional standard as a dancer; some are injured out, others decide to have families -- all of them get older. There are some who find they have a genuine preference for academic study and research.

The Discourse of Dance Education:

The importance of language was recognised by many people at the conference, particularly the power of words to distort meaning. It was, in fact, used as a major talking point in many presentations. Chan suggested dancing is tied to trends in fashion because the human body "carries social markers." Social markers, as symbols and signs of social status and affiliation, are essentially language-like structures. If dances are action systems with a basically language-like structure, they can be "read" (Chan) -- as long as we understand the language of the speakers/movers concerned. Without this knowledge we can only guess at what is happening.

Even so, the potential of language and communication as a field for investigation and scholarly research was not recognised or included in the framework of discussions about the future of dance education. The same is true for sociological and anthropological enquiry. Vital relationships between spoken

language and movement language, social action and danced action, currently have no place in this discourse. If the dance community itself -- importantly, its educators -- does not address these things, then who will create the necessary intellectual environment in which informed debate, commentary and critical enquiry can occur?

In the absence of substantial evidence to the contrary, one might assume that this impoverished critical practice is simply the mirror and measure of an impoverished and essentially trivial art; that Australian dance not only has not, but is not capable of generating a distinctive and critical voice (Dempster, 1987:7).

Reporting on a Small Companies Conference held in Australia five years ago (1987), Gardner identified similar problems:

The depth of discussion that took place was limited for several reasons ... the tradition from which the conference emerged was one in which ... people (talked) about issues of funding and administration rather than about issues of the theory and practice of dance itself (Gardner, 1987:33).

The choice of terminology in the discourse of dance educators in Perth appeared to reflect a desire for greater linguistic complexity. Alien terms kept recurring which were borrowed from the discourses of other disciplines -- sometimes with unfortunate results. The 'R&D' ('research and development') jargon used in discussions about higher education at this meeting (and others -- see 1990 Discussion Paper) is appropriated from the discourse of hard industrial technology.

Apart from 'research and development' projects in education, there were proposals put forward for 'cross-art' and 'cross-cultural' projects. This kind of make-work bureaucratic jargon can be shorthand for almost anything. Community dance projects were included in these proposals -- all of them having a very high practical/performance component. Such projects should work well as strategies for improving community awareness and provide new employment opportunities for dancers. They are less likely to improve the level of dance scholarship or encourage recognition by academic institutions.⁷

The term 'aesthetic' has also been appropriated by arts/music teacher educators over a long period -- this time from a philosophical discourse. It is used liberally as a synonym for the more problematic term 'artistic' (opposed to not-artistic). It categorises human actions and objects according to an aesthetic/not-aesthetic opposition. This use is an over-simplification which misrepresents a field of intellectual enquiry and renders the concepts it signifies almost meaningless. As Best suggests:

... it is less conducive to error to regard the aesthetic as a way of perceiving an object or activity than as a constituent feature of it. I mention this because the term 'aesthetic content' is often used, and it carries the misleading implication that the aesthetic is something that can be added or subtracted (Best, 1978:99).

Career structures, particularly for older dancers, are perennial matters of concern. Past assumptions about dancing as a career are being examined and some important questions are being asked -- mainly as a result of AADE initiatives like the Safe Dance project (1990). What does it mean to have a career as a professional dancer today? Two important matters were raised in Perth which added a new edge to this question. Chan told the conference that he always appreciates and looks for "thinking dancers" as working partners in his company. At the same time a tertiary dance student pointed out that very few new dancers were being employed by contemporary companies like Chan's One Extra Company. Instead they are finding that experienced dancers tend to move sideways from one company to another, shutting out the new graduates who complete tertiary courses.

A new determination emerged from the meeting to look more closely at the possibilities of Community Dance as a career option. Exciting work is being done in this field by Beth Shelton from Deakin University in Victoria and Joan Pope in Western Australia. Chan, Watson, Stock and Shelton have worked with some amazingly diverse cultures that exist around Australia -- even within the long established European-based population. As Watson observed in the opening seminar, people in Townsville do not move and walk like people in Melbourne. He stressed the importance for dance-makers of carefully observed subtle differences in the ordinary movement language of the general public.⁸ Many possibilities for useful research exist in this area.

In the opening session Watson also asked: "What happens to the talented young choreographers? They are often the rebels who break the rules or simply drop out ... Where do they go?" Lack of support by schools, companies and funding bodies is an important part of the answer, but students also need a climate within the dance community which permits experimentation and radical social enquiry. It is important that these matters be raised; however, if contemporary dance in Australia is not to become "... an impoverished and essentially trivial art ...," thinking about the political and social roles of the dancer cannot be simply categorised 'Community Dance' and dismissed from the scene.

One of the major influences in decision-making about the education and training of contemporary dancers in Australia must surely be found in the AADE itself. Educators have the power to impart beliefs, not just information, and to shape the course careers will take. Debate about this social role and

responsibility are an important element of the discourse of dance education. Chan added another dimension to this when he asked: "Can the decision-makers on funding committees see past their own ethnocentric experience of dances and dancing -- probably in ballet or European-based 'modern' styles? And how can we read contemporary and post-modern Australian works within this kind of framework?"

The role of in-depth scholarly research is not perceived within the dance community to have any structural relationship to the status and fortunes of dancing or dancers in Australia. It is, however, the only genuine avenue to the kind of academic status dance educators seek. The need identified at the conference for unspecified 'research and development' projects is not the same thing. The shortage of resource material for teachers, which was the major area in education targeted for action at the conference, is a symptom of this wider problem.

Some of the categories and ethnic boundaries the Australian dance community has constructed for itself were being measured and viewed with growing unease in Perth. A real sense of urgency and drive towards change was evident throughout an exhausting and constantly challenging five days.

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NOTES

1. The stated objectives of AADE include intentions to develop dance education nationally; to find ways of establishing dance as a serious field of study; to establish a place for dance in 'total arts programs' in educational institutions; to recognise the cultural importance of all dance traditions in Australia; to improve community awareness and to prepare teachers for work in dance related fields.
2. The first BA program in Dance in Australia was instituted at Rusden College in Victoria in 1978. A variety of courses has been offered since then including BA programs in five major state universities (soon to include the Australian National University in Canberra), with a total of approximately one hundred students. Post-graduate options are offered by the faculties of Education at Melbourne University and at the University of New South Wales.

3. Fundamental weaknesses have been identified throughout teacher education in Australia. These are said to relate to outdated teaching methods and professional practice, and the cultural biases of an aging male population in the profession (Turney, 1990). I would add that the reductionist, mechanistic view of human behaviour which has dominated much of arts and music education for several decades is an equally fundamental problem. Efforts to improve the 'academic image' (Dance Report, 1990) of teachers and courses will succeed only when the focus shifts from teaching strategies to the quality of what is taught: the depth and reliability of what is imparted to students.
4. AADE has encountered some difficulty in its attempts to arrange representation at its meetings by members of Aboriginal dance groups. The need for renewed efforts to be made was widely acknowledged. It is possible that AADE is perceived by Aboriginal people to be a pressure group of and for white middle class dancers.
5. Some political aspects of this situation have been addressed by L. Fisher (1989:41). In funding considerations "... professional Bharata Natyam dancers like professional Aboriginal dancers deserve to be treated like professional ballet dancers, not as 'outstanding ethnic dance practitioners'."
6. While critics and writers in the visual arts since the Dadaists -- at least as early as the 1920s -- have vigorously debated the role of art and artists in society (Murphy, 1990), dancers (and to some extent musicians) have been silent. Attempts to redress this have begun in Australia with some interesting work by the Writings on Dance Collective in Victoria (Dempster, Gardner, Thompson and Walton).
7. Current dance-related research is concentrated in the areas of development and learning theory, physiology, psychology, kinesiology, movement techniques/analysis and therapies. With very few exceptions, history appears to be the only other field in which current research is specifically related to the dance.
8. During the conference week Watson performed (with Patrick Irmir) a memorable work entitled "Kerouac". It was based on selected poems by Kerouac and on careful observation of the subtleties of ordinary movement.

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