

## REVIEW

*Understanding Dance*. GRAHAM McFEE. London/New York; Routledge, 1992. 344 pp. including introduction, references and index. Hardback Edition: \$65.00 ISBN 0-415-07809-1; Paperback Edition: \$24.50 [American]. ISBN 0-415-07810-5. REVIEWER: David Best, University of Wales.

To put it bluntly, Dr. McFee's *Understanding Dance* is the best book on the philosophy of dance which I have read. It considers the central issues which are of concern in the study, criticism and understanding of dance, and it does so in an admirably clear, engagingly lucid and attractive style. Unlike so many books of academic depth, this one avoids esoteric terminology, and is very *readable* -- one does not want to put it down. The book is replete with illuminating examples, which contribute much to Dr. McFee's aim of ensuring that the philosophical questions he considers are directly relevant. There is too often a tendency for academics to consider their own questions, rather than those which are of concern to those directly involved in the field. That he is fully aware of this tendency is made clear in the Introduction, where he recounts the anecdote of the man searching for a dropped coin, not where he had lost it, in the darkness, but under a pool of light shed by a street lamp on the opposite side of the road. Too often, and dangerously, philosophy is assumed to be the province of ivory-towered abstractions, and it has to be conceded that the work of some philosophers implicitly supports that conception. Dr. McFee's book, by contrast, shows irrefutably how rigorous philosophy can illuminate and affect practice and appreciation.

While Dr. McFee's book does not directly address anthropological questions, many of those questions are underlain by philosophical issues, as is clearly recognised by contributions to *JASHM*. In my view, this volume offers insights of seminal value to those concerned with the anthropological study of human movement.

The book, as I have indicated, should contribute substantially to dance criticism, and it is an admirable course text, covering as it does, the major topical and perennial questions. Indeed, in my view it should be regarded as requisite reading for students of dance. One of its great merits is that it brings the insights of recent philosophical innovation to bear on dance in a way

which is engagingly accessible to those with little or no background in philosophy. Even the enterprise of philosophy -- what it is, and what it can achieve for a clearer understanding of dance -- is lucidly explained early on, and exemplified throughout. Most people outside philosophy are unaware of the revolution in thinking which has taken place in recent years. Within the field of dance (as in other fields) there is often a continued, unquestioning dependence on texts which, however admirable in their day, have been superseded within philosophy. Dr. McFee, with great skill, combines his expertise in philosophy and his keen appreciation of dance to make these fresh insights available to all those concerned with the study and criticism of dance.

While I entirely agree with Dr. McFee's criticisms of symbolic theories of meaning, I disagree with his optimism that "the popularity of a symbolic account of meaning has greatly waned" (p. 116). With respect, this seems to me to be over-optimistic. In my experience, in all of the art forms, and in theories of linguistic meaning, language-education etc., there is still a prevalent, largely unquestioned assumption that meaning -- all meaning -- is symbolic. I try to expose the fallacies inherent in that assumption in some of my work: it is a hard tussle, not because of anything inherently difficult in an alternative account -- indeed, on the contrary, the alternative is usually too *simple* to grasp -- but because the assumption is so deeply ingrained that it is difficult, often impossible, to induce people even to *consider* the possibility that symbolism, as a general account of meaning, may be fundamentally misconceived. In the arts, and especially, perhaps, dance, the unquestioned assumption that meaning *is* symbolism dies hard, indeed, it shows no symptom yet even of a terminal disease.

The consequences are highly significant, for an acceptance of meaning as symbolic almost inevitably leads to subjectivism, or to radical self-contradiction if one tries to hold the positions of both symbolism and objective meaning. Subjectivism has done, and continues to wreak, great damage on the credentials of the study and criticism of dance and the arts as fully rigorous, intellectual disciplines. As Dr. McFee puts it: "The aim of criticism is understanding". That applies, or should apply, as much to dance as to science and any other legitimate academic discipline. The methods may be different -- al-

though not *entirely* different – but understanding is achieved and extended only by means of *objective* criticism.

Let me emphasise that I am not, of course, denying the possibility of symbolic meaning; what I am denying is a general or universal *theory* of symbolic meaning, i.e. which holds that all meaning is necessarily symbolic.

Dr. McFee's book is, among its other merits, a commendably clear, sustained and in-depth account of how such objective understanding can be achieved. In that respect, especially, the book will, I suspect, be revolutionary to most in the fields of dance-criticism and dance-study. May I plead with those whose thinking is still largely, if implicitly, influenced by conventional philosophical accounts to read this book with an open mind. It may well be radically disruptive of long-held, unquestioned platitudes, but the disturbance will be of a refreshingly incisive, rigorously constructive nature.

Sometimes philosophical accounts of the arts are regarded as destructive of the personal, feeling-response which is at the core of involvement with the arts. But that is a dangerous misunderstanding of the character and contribution of philosophy, or at least of what philosophy can contribute. In this book, Dr. McFee's keen love for and appreciation of dance are abundantly evident throughout, and he shows, entirely successfully, that incisive philosophical thought can contribute immensely and sensitively to appreciation and understanding.

Perhaps the point, which is a central theme of the book, can be summarised in the following quotation from McTaggart, which Dr. McFee cites in his Introduction.

I don't think it's any good appealing...to the heart on questions of truth. After all, there is only one way of getting at the truth and that is by proving it. All that talk about the heart only comes to saying "It must be true because we want it to be". Which is both false and rather cowardly.

Dr. McFee's book shows that there is no opposition between emotional involvement and intellectual enquiry. On the contrary, deeper understanding confers the possibility of deeper, more discriminating feeling.

It is a splendid book which deserves to be widely recognised as marking a turning point in our understanding of dance.