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The Performer-Audience Connection: Emotion to Metaphor and Society

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Dance ethnologist Judith Lynne Hanna describes her monograph as an “empirically informed essay”. In actuality the major portion of the book consists of a series of eight independent essays. Each of these deals exclusively with one particular dance performance in a concert series sponsored by the Smithsonian Division of Performing Arts: American Tap Dance, Khatakali dance-drama from Kerala, Kuchipudi classical dances from India, American Modern and Post Modern performances, as well as Japanese Kabuki solos. The chapters dealing with specific dance forms are nicely balanced with both overview and specific performance details, followed by an analysis of the results from interviews and a comparison of questionnaires.

Hanna’s hypothesis here is that dance functions as a “well-known vehicle to express emotion. The moving human body usually captivates an observer’s consciousness through perceptions of the multisensory stimulation of sight, sound, movement, touch, and smell, the dancing body excites emotions. Dancing arouses feelings via its associations with basic life functions. Birth, life, and death are bodily and the human body is the vessel and the vehicle of dance.” (See also *To Dance is Human*, 1979).

Hanna acknowledges that dance is an aesthetic form of expression that allows us to have access to a wide range of emotions that are frequently repressed, suppressed or disallowed as culturally unacceptable in day-to-day life. She suggests that the tremendous vitality of dance for both the performer and the observer rests in the fact

that both are given vicarious or voyeuristic access to these emotions through the medium of performance.

Hanna developed a questionnaire to be issued to audience members throughout the course of this concert series in an attempt to ascertain whether or not audiences were accurately receiving the messages that the performers believed themselves to be sending. She complemented the analysis and quantification of the audience questionnaires with a series of in-depth performer interviews (Hanna admits that the questionnaire data are not valid statistically).

This broad spectrum of cross-cultural performances provided an excellent opportunity to consider whether or not dance performance is in fact a universal system of non-verbal communication. The essays clearly indicate just how difficult accurate communication is even when the performers are American. Many misunderstandings exist between performer/senders and the audience/receivers. These intensify when foreign groups or individuals perform. The result is a great deal of frustration on the part of the receivers who are largely unfamiliar with the metaphors being manipulated in the dance and the meanings and/or emotions being implied through the articulation of a particular movement vocabulary.

There are serious difficulties with Hanna's hypothesis that all performers dance to elicit an emotional response. There are several dance forms, or parts of dance forms, that focus on the technical accomplishment of the performer. The assumption is that the observer will intellectually comprehend and appreciate the dancer's physical prowess and technical expertise. For example, the avant-garde dancer utilizes highly abstract and often pedestrian movements in order to deliberately contravene the possibility of emotive content.

The chapter on tap dancing is particularly fine. Hanna's long-term research into African dances has equipped her well to consider the history and significance of this uniquely American dance form. Her pre-conceived notions were that the three black dancers would share similar performance expectations regarding the emotions they wished to express. Her reasoning was that, "They came from the same ethnic background, learned to dance in a similar manner, danced as featured artists in comparable places, and were roughly of the same generation. Briggs was 58, Sims 53, and Green in his mid-60's" (p. 55). Her interviews proved these assumptions to be inaccurate. Briggs wanted his audience to relax and forget their financial worries. When Hanna pressed him for an explanation of how he achieved this, she elicited the following poetic response: "Well, I dance relaxed, I dance

relaxed, I dance thank god, relaxed". Briggs declared that he hated violence and he believed that performing technically demanding dances had a tendency to put an audience on edge. Alternatively Sandman Sims stated categorically that he didn't want his audience to feel anything. Sims wanted his audience to hear "When they hear, they'll feel what I feel. Like a kid with a new toy". Chuck Green said that the sounds of his tapping should evoke visual images. "These images should lead the imagination like a moving pencil to etch and fill in visual concepts and events and stories" (pp. 56-57).

As the above quotations demonstrate, these three dancers expressed dramatically different performance intentions. The primary messages they were concerned with sending to their audiences were: Briggs wanted people to feel relaxed; Sims wanted to inspire a sense of delight and surprise; while Green wished to use the sounds of his tapping to evoke mental images. The audience members who responded to the Hanna survey were quite perceptive with regard to picking up some of these messages.

There are two points to be noted here: firstly, tap dancing is a well-known and familiar form of American vernacular dance so at the simplest level the audience was familiar with both the cultural constraints and aesthetic expectations surrounding it. Partly for these reasons the audience responded favourably to the most positive elements like the recognizable level of high energy, smiling (therefore reassuring) faces, and the technical proficiency involved in the manipulation of the tapping sounds to syncopate and beat out complex rhythms.

Secondly, although Hanna is critical of the development of universals that explain the why and wherefores of dance at a cross-cultural level, there are some very specific problems with her hypothesis that dancers are attempting to portray emotions. As previously noted, not all dance is focused on the communication of emotion. Nor are all dancers performing solely for the purpose of self-expression.

This is perhaps the greatest weakness in the book. There simply are no universals regarding dance that are truly applicable cross-culturally. As we have seen, even with a small group of dancers with similar ethnic backgrounds and technical skills there are no commonalities in what they believe they are projecting to the audience. Additionally, can we consider relaxation, surprise and the evocation of visual images as emotions? According to Hanna, ". . . emotions are what the participants in the performer-audience interaction say they are". Is this a satisfactory qualifier to her basic premise that dance expresses emotion? I think not. It appears to be an arbitrary imposi-

tion of a faulty hypothesis. In my view, Hanna's data convincingly support this assertion.

There are also other problems at an inter-cultural level which may be most clearly understood with a closer examination of the chapter on Indrani and her presentation of classical Indian Kuchipudi repertoire. Kuchipudi is an ancient dance form combining both sacred and secular elements. "Hindu spiritual and philosophical thought requires that the goal of the artist is to suggest, reveal, or recreate the infinite, divine self. Artistic creation was conceived as the supreme means of realizing the Universal Being. Art was a sacrifice, a dedicated offering of the best that one has to the best that one seeks. . . Not only were art and religion inseparable but so, too, were spiritual and sexual ecstasy" (p. 64).

The Kuchipudi gestures are a codified mimetic language with either specific or metaphoric meaning implied. The following example should serve to illustrate the high level of culturally bound body specificity and the corresponding meaning:

"A level pose of the head conveys serenity and usually begins a dance. Raising the head indicates dignity or divinity. Vigorously nodding the head expresses anger, threat, or boasting. Moving the eyeballs in circles conveys valor, passion, and fury. Up and down movements of the eyeballs express wonder; horizontal shifts suggest heroism, fear, direction, and mystery. Diagonal movements denote grief. Eyelid fluttering conveys excitement and terror. Sidelong glances express dalliance, whereas a projected wide-eyed look signifies anger and challenge. Chest movements common to Kuchipudi are, 'drawn in', denoting fear and modesty; 'heaved-up', for pride, courage and anger. Relevant waist movements are 'turned-aside', as in wielding weapons: "shaken," the stretching involved in wielding weapons. Folding in the waist expresses female shyness; undulation, seductiveness" (p. 66-70).

Just as the tap dancing was readily appreciated by an American audience who understood the symbols implied through this dance form, it is also true that Indian audiences have access to the complex symbols utilized in the Kuchipudi dance form. But this system is very difficult to read correctly by non-Indians.

Indrani side-stepped the question of what feelings she wanted to communicate to the audience. "When we are trained, we are trained to communicate through the technique the feeling, themes, and so on of the dance, and that in itself already conveys a great deal. Using the old dance technique, the medium of the body, and the story (because our stories are universal), so much is conveyed because it is. . . timeless" (pp. 70, 71). Indrani perceived herself as a storyteller through the manipulation of a complex mime code and intricate tech-

nical system. The response from the audience was predictably mixed, with Indians more correctly perceiving the gestural language with many different interpretations, from non-Indians.

The performance intentions of American avant-garde artists were also misconstrued by the audience members. Their performance metaphors were just as obscure as those from non-Western cultures. The movement symbols manipulated by these American performers proved inaccessible due to the lack of a shared or common cultural experience. In interviews with avant-garde dance maker Douglas Dunn he said: "My intention is just to do the dance. So, both as a choreographer and a performer, I have no idea about the dance. . .I think I make something that doesn't require that they all see it in the same way. . .It gives anybody a lot of room" (p. 99). The result of Dunn's open-ended approach to performance was that one-third of the Smithsonian audience had departed by the end of the second piece.

This book is a provocative and sometimes controversial consideration of The Performer-Audience Connection. Although Hanna has not pursued her arguments as rigorously as one would wish, she nevertheless points the way for further research in this important area of dance as a form of non-verbal communication. The information provided here is valuable for dancers, choreographers, and critics as well as social scientists and ethnologists.

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