

Myths of origin

Andree Grau considers the problems of dance's origins. [extract]

Where does dance come from?

How did it all evolve, with the dawn of humanity? How does a child acquire the ability to dance?

The evolutionary fallacy

One finds dance scholars in the 1960s and even the 1980s still using evolutionary theories, long discredited and outdated in the social sciences. Until fairly recently most dance history books started with a chapter on 'primitive' dancing, moved up the evolutionary ladder to 'folk' dancing, then on to non-European 'classical' forms, finally reaching the ultimate - Western theatrical dance! In these volumes human 'progress' is presented as a given, an unchallengeable truth. 'We' are at one end of the scale, the 'primitives' are at the other, and everyone else is somewhere on the continuum. When dancers, teachers, critics, or historians use the term 'ethnic dance', for example, they are separating 'our' dancing from 'theirs'. They are, probably unknowingly, perpetuating the evolutionary fallacy.

The universalist fallacy

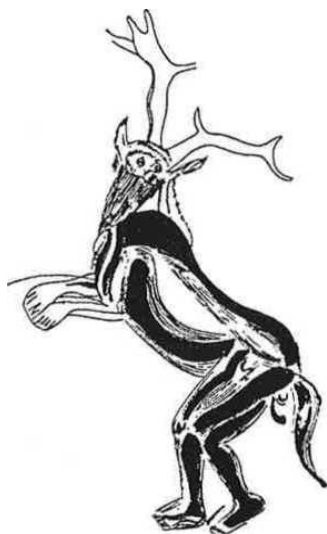
In the beginning of the twentieth century, Havelock Ellis argued that 'life is a dance' because the whole world is filled with unceasing movement, or that 'the dance is the basis of all the arts that find their origins in the human body'. Why should dancing be singled out in such a way? Why not walking, or eating? After all, most human beings engage in these activities more frequently than they do in dancing. To argue that since dancing is movement, and movement is universal, dancing is universal and therefore the basis for all the arts, is nothing but a false syllogism.

Speculations

Looking into the origins of the act of dancing is very difficult: we cannot even know the origins of some dance forms that are still in existence today, because of the absence of historical evidence. So how can we talk with authority about prehistorical times? Any discussion can only be speculative.

Looking at early paintings or sculptures also fosters speculation, though of course it is likely that people danced before they started painting and sculpting. For example, in the cave of Trois-Freres in the Ariege, south-west France, we can see a figure which was engraved and painted in the rock 10,000 years ago. It shows someone, man or woman, wearing a large horned mask, whirling. Throughout the

world today we see whirling movements in 'religious' dances. Similar engravings have been found in southern Africa and other parts of the world. One could therefore postulate the idea that 10,000 years ago human beings, in many areas of the world, danced to contact the supernatural world. Obviously one has to be very careful with these kinds of speculations and not enter the realm of fantasy. For instance some dance writers described a prehistorical danced ceremony: 12,000 years ago women would come, with their children, to dance in the cave in the hope of becoming fertile once more. Looking at the footprints in the clay, they argued that the women danced with their children in front of them, and that they used a binary rhythm, with the main beat on the left foot. However, looking at the actual physical evidence in Pech-Merle, what does one find? Two footprints of a child, the right and the left, and slightly behind, deep into the ground, one footprint of a woman's left foot...



Dance writers have looked at the dances of people today who have economic systems similar to Neolithic ones, arguing that from these dances one could deduce how primeval dances looked. However, once again, one has to be very wary: one cannot look at the dances of people who have little technology and appear relatively primitive - such as the Australian Aborigines, or the San (who used to be called Bushmen) of Southern Africa - and expect them to illustrate how early men and women danced. All the dances we see today, be they performed by the Venda people, one of the many African nations, or by members of the Royal Ballet, are contemporary dances, in the sense that they are performed by present-day people. The San or Aborigines are *not* stone-age people, they are twentieth-century people who have developed in ways different from ours. And besides, why should there be a link between the complexity of a people's technology and the complexity of its dances?

Every dance says something about the history of the people who created it, but every dance is also a reinvention. *Swan Lake* performed in Birmingham in 1993 gives us clues as to what *Swan Lake* performed in St Petersburg in 1895 was like, but it is not the same *Swan Lake*. Similarly, *Tjilati*, the brolga (bird) dance of the Tiwi people of northern Australia, performed today at a ritual, may give us indications as to how it looked 10,000 years ago, but it is not the *same* dance. For centuries, people have led varied life styles, sometimes even when living in neighbouring countries, and we cannot look at *one* history of *one* dance. We have to look at *many* histories of *many* dances. *Tjilati* is *not* the ancestor of *Swan Lake*.