

Jasmin Lau
Student as Producer (Research) Project

The Aesthetics of Dance

Participants: Jasmin Lau, Kris Mann (co-leader), Felix Yau (co-leader), Yvonne Goh, Ping Shin Poon, Finn Tan, Teng Yi Ling, Brian Lim, Alistair Ceurvost (two sessions), Myk Igbins (one session), Dorine Mwesiga (one session), Natalie Soh (one session), Farah Mat Husin (one session)

Sessions One, Two:

Participants discussed and explored the issues that we would be exploring over the next few weeks, and focused on the main question – “What is dance?”

I introduced the session by articulating a number of themes as questions, such as:

How is movement used to tell a story? What movements convey emotion, relationships, actions, and why? What symbols represent and corresponds to ‘reality’?

We began by looking at historical and classical background of the evolution of dance; from the beginning of the 15th century, as that was when it began to be noted as a cultural tradition and dance sequences were notated and recorded, albeit haphazardly. We all agreed that dance notation often failed to capture the entire movement, although it does help give a rough idea of what is involved. Kinaesthetic learning seemed very much the consensus for learning about and appreciating dance in general.

We found the connection between social dance and political resistance especially interesting, as we focussed on the 60’s genre of rock and roll. ‘Rock dancing throughout the ‘60’s was given significance by dancers engaged in social action. For many members of the counterculture, the free-flowing, internally focused dancing was an integral part of giving up control and losing oneself in the drug experience. For more politically minded people, rock dance was a metaphor for political awareness’ (Novack, 173). Most of us were unfamiliar with freestyle, contact dance, as current trends have moved away from paired or group dances; instead presenting dance groups as individuals who perform the same moves, but sans physical connection.

A debate arose over whether music and dance were necessarily linked, whether as an audible phenomenon or as imagined in the performer’s mind. We also considered whether it was music that transformed mere movement into dance. Quite a few participants were of this opinion – we found it difficult to envision dance without some sort of rhythmic accompaniment. Even in dances which do not use music, the dancer tends to create their own version – steppers slap their torso and thighs, and stamp their feet in order to create a rhythm alongside their movements. **Salah** is a dancer who is very popular for this sort of dance and it is his trademark to use his body in creating music and dance at the same time.

Each member chose two particular dance genres and was asked to trace it back to its origins. Participants were asked to research one dance genre that they hated, and one that they enjoyed. They found that they started to appreciate and enjoy those dance genres that they disliked after learning more about it. For example, participant Kris Mann, who terms himself a ‘popper’, chose ‘turfig’ as his disliked subject. Coincidentally, a famed popper, **Green-Tek** came to Warwick University on a tour to UK and claimed that much of his technique was, in fact, thanks to turfig. After this, Kris actually began to use turfig technique training to aid him in other dance pursuits.

We moved on to physical, kinaesthetic learning, covering basic techniques of different dances and performing exercises to strengthen what we termed body-memory. In order to perform a move well, we found that we had to practise it repeatedly as a move broken down into several parts before even attempting to integrate it within a dance. In particular, there is a popping movement termed the ‘wave’, known as such due to the rippling effect it has across the body, making it look as if the dancer has liquidly rolled their body. Yet, during practice, we isolated the particular muscles that made up the entire move, and practiced it in 6-8 movements, down to details such as moving the fingers in a particular manner.

We found that classical movements (i.e. ballet, contemporary, lyrical) were difficult for those who termed themselves ‘hip hop’ dancers, and vice versa, although classically trained dancers were quick to pick up choreography.

Session Three, Anurekha Ghosh workshops; Performance and Choreography

We explored Indian (Kathak) dance and its traditional roots and then expanded into contemporary alteration, investigating stylization, aesthetics, and how this approach contributes in its interpretation, presentation, performance, and characterization. Kathak dance itself is one of a number of traditional Indian dances. **Anurekha** taught us the history of these dances, which parts of India they came from, and what moves and costumes characterised them. We discovered specific moves to be symbolic of particular Gods or words – for example, pressing the thumb and the forefinger together, with the other fingers splayed outwards, was to create the shape of an eye; more specifically, Shiva’s all-seeing eye.

We found that, once again, kinaesthetic learning was the best way to explore this completely new type of dance, and gained a renewed appreciation of the graceful movements which were extremely technically challenging.

It was fascinating to discover choreography from a completely new perspective. Because of limited resources in university dance and the accepted notion of choreography, dancers will often choose pre-recorded music and use the rhythms and lyrics as inspiration for a dance that will accompany that piece of music. However, we were introduced to totally new ways of choreographing – using images or poses as inspiration, and using a composer to create music suited to the dance after it has been choreographed, rather than the other way around.

In traditional Kathak dance, during an unchoreographed ‘phrase’ of the performance (the performance is usually split into a set dance, followed by unplanned on-the-spot choreography), the dancer will actually ‘sing’ to the musicians who accompany her, making a series of noises that represent dance moves. Kathak therefore uses a verbal dance notation, or short-hand, creating a language of its own. The word ‘tak’ meant a foot stamp, and other sounds would indicate a turn. After relaying this series of sounds, the dancer then literally enacts what has just been spoken. This, of course, would be impossible for recorded music to follow, as it is entirely improvised – seasoned musicians who understand Kathak dance must be present. The relationship between the dancer and musicians seems much more nuanced and symbiotic than the pre-recorded music that is utilised in most non-classical performances today.

There was a discussion on why this occurs – a lack of musicians and willingness to be present at all rehearsals was an immediate point, as well as a simple lack of awareness that it was even possible. It was also posited that more modern types of dance (e.g. breakdance, house, popping and locking) were associated with music that couldn’t be replicated live in the same manner, as it would require electronic assistance. Different musical styles and knowledge would have to be fused together for this sort of performance to be used as a template for modern dance.

We also looked at some of her performances, which looked at dance in a post-modern and contemporary manner, as Anurekhka has fused the influences of modernity and technology with her style of classical Indian dance to create a completely new synthesis. We were able to view some DVD recordings of the performance, and while this was not the same as watching the actual event, we were able to get a very good idea of how she used the stage and sets. Anurekhka employed silk screens to project filmed images and dance sequences at the same time as using dancers on stage, which added to dance dynamics and kept the audience working hard to try and view everything at once.

Friday 25th November 2011 – Jasmin Vardimon Dance workshop

We began with warm ups and exercises. We were asked to cross the room in large, sweeping movements, using as much space as possible, imitating a snake. We found that our bodily movements and awareness of space changed, especially as we added in different factors – such as imagining that the floor was afire.

In this session, we questioned how experience feeds into dance. Was it necessary that we had to experience/envision ourselves in the actual situation in order to create a certain feeling? **Mafalda Deville**, who has worked with Jasmin Vardimon for over a decade, indicated that her approach was to attempt to literally embody the experience. We were encouraged to make noise and act almost exactly in the same bodily manner as we would if placed in the same situation in reality, but placing two unusual situations together created a new attitude entirely. For example, acting as a snake, or enacting drunkenness are fairly simple scenarios. However, once combined, we tended to take on very new types of movement.

We were then taught a routine that was again very different to what we had been used to. Although, like Anurekhka, the Jasmin Vardimon Company is a contemporary dance and physical theatre company, their approach was much less technical and more about imitating a movement that would be unusual but congruous in real life. For example, one move was a mixture between a crouched run, and a sharp arm wave that was shown to us and described as ‘swatting a fly’. We also had ‘spider moves’, ‘opening a window’, ‘touching the heart’ and other similar analogies for the movements we were taught.

Physical theatre is fascinating in that it lies in between theatre and dance, using dance as a medium to accompany a written plot or storyline. This may be why we found the movements used more ‘realistic’ than that of mainstream contemporary dance.

Results:

During the normal sessions, we also looked at dance’s role in mythology, religion and ritual. We questioned the relationship between choreographer and performer – who creates? What place does improvisation have? Where is artistic intention located? What does dance mean? Is it authentic? We also focused a lot on the relationship between music and dance, and how dance is classified.

Unfortunately, most of the participants attended erratically and dropped out before a performance could be orchestrated. However, feedback has been positive, and the participants who referred to themselves as non-dancers before the project began have gone on to become very active on the university cultural dance scene (Yvonne Goh, Finn Tan). Participants expressed a more open mindset to different types of dance, and a new appreciation for the art and beauty of dance in general. It opened up new pathways of discussion and perspective on the potential that dance has in relation to our everyday movement.

Although few of the questions we opened up were resolved – there was no clear consensus on whether music and dance were necessarily linked, or whether the dance belonged to a dancer or the choreographer, it certainly made participants reconsider their assumptions over dance. This has been a very enjoyable

project to run, even though attendance was not particularly reliable, and we have definitely discovered new and unusual ways to learn and think about dance.