

Timely Observations About Dance

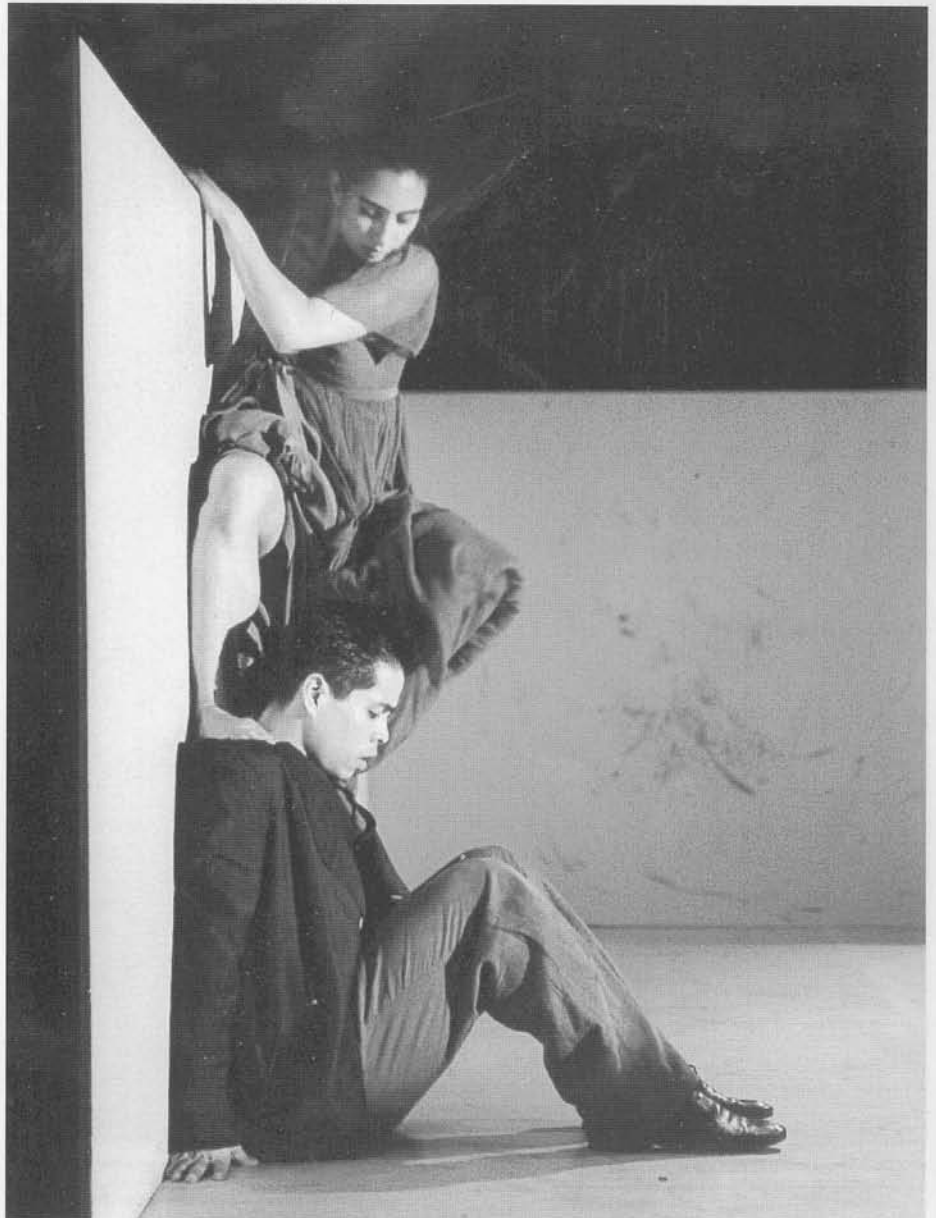
Recent public discussions about the situation of contemporary dance in Germany have focused on the disparities between traditional classical dance and contemporary dance. Ballet enjoys generous funding but suffers from a paucity of aesthetic verve; contemporary dance, on the other hand, though it must try to cope with severe financial handicaps, nevertheless displays a disproportionately high level of innovation and creativity. On the one side, there are the classical ballet choreographers and the crisis of meaning in that genre as it is currently practiced in exorbitantly expensive state and civic theaters; on the other side, are the professional contemporary choreographers who, despite a fervently revolutionary climate and the development of new and creative models of production, are handicapped by severely limited funding. This polarity will no doubt engender profound changes in the structures of dance in Germany.

THE CRISIS OF MEANING IN BALLETT

is obviously a consequence of the crisis of relevance in the state-owned public theaters. Today this theatrical activities still take place in architectural spaces that were erected under vastly different social, political and cultural paradigms than nowadays. The nobility of the feudal era and the bourgeoisie of the „Gründerzeit“ (1871-73) had completely different needs for self-presentation in the socio-political arena. Feudalism's centralized perspective with its focus on an absolute monarch led to the creation of the proscenium stage. Performers were displayed (and confined) within the illuminated precincts of the proscenium while their noble audi-

ences sat safely opposite them in orchestra-level seats, box seats, and balconies. The architecture of the audience space in today's theaters still expresses this strictly hierarchical social structure. Classical ballet's techniques - its *en face* and *en dehors*, its styles of interpretation, symbolic vocabulary, etc. - all derive from this hierarchical attitude. Dance reflected an idealized world. Dancers were never treated as emancipated individuals, and the sources of ballet's current conformist attitude still lie in this feudal and anachronistic approach.

Urs Dietrich, Bremer Tanztheater; Photo: Jörg Landsberg



LOSS OF SOCIETAL FUNCTIONS

Nowadays theater has lost many of its erstwhile societal functions to other fields. Self-presentation, the all-important act of „seeing and being seen,“ is now more likely to take place in VIP lounges at tennis, soccer, boxing, or other sports events. Education and intellectual enlightenment have been reduced to the concept of information and are now propagated via telecommunications and the new media. The introduction of film and television have made theater almost irrelevant as an effective instrument for societal communication. Social consensus defines itself today not through a shared theatrical experience, but through „Nielsen ratings“ and TV viewing figures.

THE OUTLOOK FOR DANCE

Wherever it lacks an extraordinary artistic personality, wherever it fails to evolve a contemporary artistic idiom, ballet inevitably loses its relevance, validity and legitimacy. Although it continues to dominate the stages of many large theaters, romantic ballet has become little more than mere decoration. Motivated by financial and/or political opportunism, some theater directors and cultural politicians have sought to commercialize (and thus spoil) the few distinctive artistic personalities who continue to give theater its meaning and *raison d'être*, but they are committing a tremendous cultural, political and so-

cial error. The consequences of precisely this mistake are scheduled to befall Susanne Linke and Urs Dietrich in Bremen.

The most important function still fulfilled by theater and especially by dance is the function of play. Play is a non-teleological activity taken seriously. In contrast to the so-called „play“ of commercialized sports (which is really nothing other than athletic work), dance can create an alternate, independent reality alongside the familiar reality of everyday life. Contemporary dance occupies a position which is diametrically opposed to purely pragmatic thinking. The many characteristics of contemporary artistic dance include: commitment to aesthetic research; playful search for innovative ways to deal with new media and a changed political reality; new awareness of the human body within a changing environment; articulation of alternative narrative structures; development of individualized and subtly differentiated movement qualities; questioning of perceptual habits; and an effort to transcend or escape from familiar sites of (re)presentation.

Audiences are invited to participate in this remarkable play during the unique events called „performances.“ Only by temporarily withdrawing from our customarily pragmatic behavior with its acquisitively conditioned habits can human beings enjoy recreation in its true sense, namely, as the re-creation and regeneration of our intellectual and spiritual powers. When we witness a dance performance, we are able to actively participate in this enlivening process. Dance today is the cultural event at which human beings communicate most directly with others of their species. This communion is the source of dance's power and fascination for a society whose members are becoming increasingly isolated as their means of communication become progressively more depersonalized.

NEW SPACES TO PLAY

Contemporary dance has responded to our increasingly complex world by developing more complex (expressive) forms of its own. No longer is there any single, fundamental codex that can serve to simplify access to this art form. This explains why contemporary dance is seldom large enough in scale to fill the inflated architecture of official public theaters, since these behemoths were created as bureaucratic institutions to supply the consuming public with officially sanctioned cultural products in an era when culture was dispensed to local audiences. Because contemporary dance is so complex and so dependent upon intimate proximity to its audiences, today's choreographers need new spaces for producing and performing their works. Such venues would make possible processes that require a variety of spatial situations; they would include performance sites whose dimensions are appropriate for the dance art in its current state of evolution. Today's dance art is nationally and internationally networked. It has won new audiences of cosmopolitan individuals who are searching for an artistic discourse commensurate with their pluralistic notions of society. They know that they can no longer find this type of discourse within the narrow bounds of a classical ballet that yearns merely to restore an outmoded and anachronistic societal order.

FUTURE-ORIENTED CULTURAL POLITICS VERSUS THE SATISFACTION OF BASIC CULTURAL NEEDS

Why should the possibilities of today's burgeoning choreographers continue to be limited by the constraints of existing real estate and theatrical architecture? Why must the art form adapt itself to suit existing supply structures? Shouldn't these structures be flexible enough to adapt themselves to evolving

aesthetic requirements? Is it financially prudent to dissolve the dance departments in civic theaters in order to make more funds available for mediocre thespian or operatic ensembles? In this context, would it be blasphemous to calculate exactly how much money a city might earn from the sale or rental of a usually centrally located, architecturally attractive theater building? Wouldn't such a sale or rental also create a more flexible structure for contemporary dance and/or theater? Couldn't such a structure produce better performances with far less organizational ballast, at less expense, and above all more innovatively? Wouldn't this create an opportunity for the city to actively participate in the international cultural dialogue?

Provocative questions, indeed! But a responsible and responsive cultural policy should not be afraid of the future, lest it rob our society of art, one of its most important sources of intellectual innovation. As Munich's cultural liaison Siegfried Hummel wrote in 1990 in his statement of principles entitled „Cultural Politics for the 1990s“: „This decade will witness increased acceptance of the insight that the many imaginative people whom we need in all fields of business and society are only to be found where the arts are allowed to play an equally important role. Progressive politics for the arts is therefore an investment in the future.“ This awareness should not lead us to commit the old mistake of applying a pragmatic cost-benefit analysis to the arts, even if this new analysis substitutes so-called „soft“ factors for hard ones.

FLEXIBLE, PLURALISTIC STRUCTURES THROUGH THEATER REFORM

Successful performances in large theaters by the Frankfurt Ballet, Merce Cunningham Dance Company, Lalala Human Steps, and other ensembles prove that even the most innovative contemporary dance can indeed present choreographic events that feature „dancerly mega-forms.“ The opportunity to work continuously with a permanent company is also an essential precondition for the success of any talented choreographer. Together, these two facts mean that the outright elimination of civic and state theaters (as demanded by many independent theater artists during the revolutionary days of the late 1960s) is absurd. What is necessary, however, are the following changes. There must be a fundamental reform in the structure of theaters; a new, integrated model should be established for independent groups; new, financially solvent production and performance sites must be created and existing theaters (either with or without their own resident ensembles) must become more adaptable.

This restructuring ought to make optimal use of the energy and intelligence of people who are committed to working in the theatrical arts. These new structures should ensure that the process of „translating artistic ideas into staged realities“ occurs as fluently and effectively as possible. Organizational structures ought to foster a climate of increased individual responsibility. Dance has a right to demand that the civic and state theaters provide it with higher budgets, a greater degree of self-determination, and equal treatment with the other performing arts. The time is long overdue for members of the younger generation to take the reins.

For many years, independent producers have been working to design and implement innovative organizational models for producing contemporary dance events. Some of these producers met recently in Cologne for a symposium entitled „Politics for Dance.“ At that meeting, they drafted a brief statement of the current situation and wrote a list of demands for changes in the politics of dance. Reprinted on the following pages, their manifesto presents cogent maxims for the evolution of a future-oriented cultural policy. ■ Walter Heun

As an independent art form in its own right, dance obeys particular laws all its own. Because of its unique position, dance needs special sponsorship structures appropriate to its artistic dynamics.

We, the producers and organizers of professional contemporary dance events together represent a forum for the diverse manifestations and forms assumed by this lively art.

As producers and organizers of guest performances, we differ from traditional theaters because we do not work solely with any single ensemble. This flexibility creates work and performance opportunities for a large number of independent artists.

Through our intensive and ongoing work with new structures, we have gained valuable skills in dealing with artistic and organizational issues and questions. We have been able to create new foundations for productions, work processes and projects and we have also successfully established national and international models for cooperation and co-production. By offering a diverse range of new dance productions at many different sites, we have been able to build a new, broadly-based, and steadily growing audience. This audience has shown avid interest in new forms of performance and in innovative aesthetic experiences. The newly developed organizational structures work with small, highly motivated teams in an extraordinarily effective manner. They are able to respond to the needs of today's artists with new production alternatives in contemporary and creative processes. **Mobility, exchange of ideas, and internationalism are essential elements of cultural politics, both today and in the future.** An artistic dialogue that transcends national boundaries is an essential condition for the success of dance. **Motivated by our sense of responsibility for dance, we therefore call for:**

Recognition of dance as an independent art form in its own right;

Equal status for dance in comparison to theater and music in the politics of sponsorship and in the securing of work and performance spaces;

Development of models and funding policies in collaboration with producers and artists primarily on the basis of criteria which will encourage quality;

Creation and ongoing support for structures which make continuous artistic work possible and secure;

Creation of sites for production and performance on local and state levels;

State financial participation to be based upon fixed percentile funding for locally supported co-productions between producers and independent dance companies;

Expansion of federal sponsoring structures through the addition of international sponsoring structures, thus encouraging the networking of German production centers for exchange of guest performances and co-productions;

Establishment of a sponsorship program for producers and organizers to support independent, international exchange projects in the dance field; this would be an essential complement to the work already carried out by the Goethe Institute;

Appropriate tax status for producers and guest performances; especially the introduction of tax-free sums into the foreign-income tax structure within the framework of the annual tax laws, this is needed so that cultural European integration will not be jeopardized;

Drafting and implementation of genuine reforms in the structure of theaters. The organizational and financial structures of the independent producers and organizers should serve as models and examples for this process. Public funds, which must be conserved and spent wisely, should not be used to cleanse budgets, but should instead be used for the establishment and support of new models. The linkage of large percentages of the funds from public cultural budgets to the civic and state theaters must - without aesthetic sacrifices - be changed to channel more funds into new organizational models within the framework of an overall reform in the structure of theaters.